

FALL SCI-FI TV PREVIEW

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

STEALING SPACE

By Adam-Troy Castro

**HARLAN
ELLISON:**
Infinite Worlds

**TERRY
BISSON:**
First Fire

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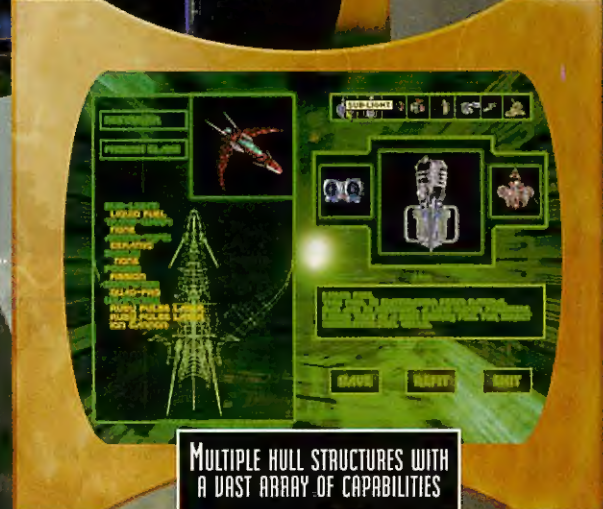
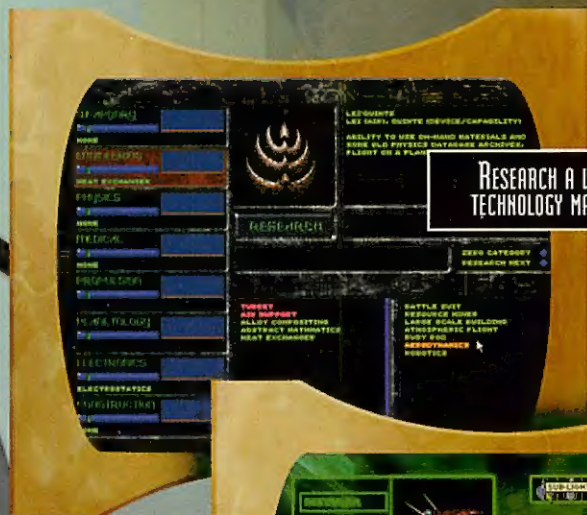
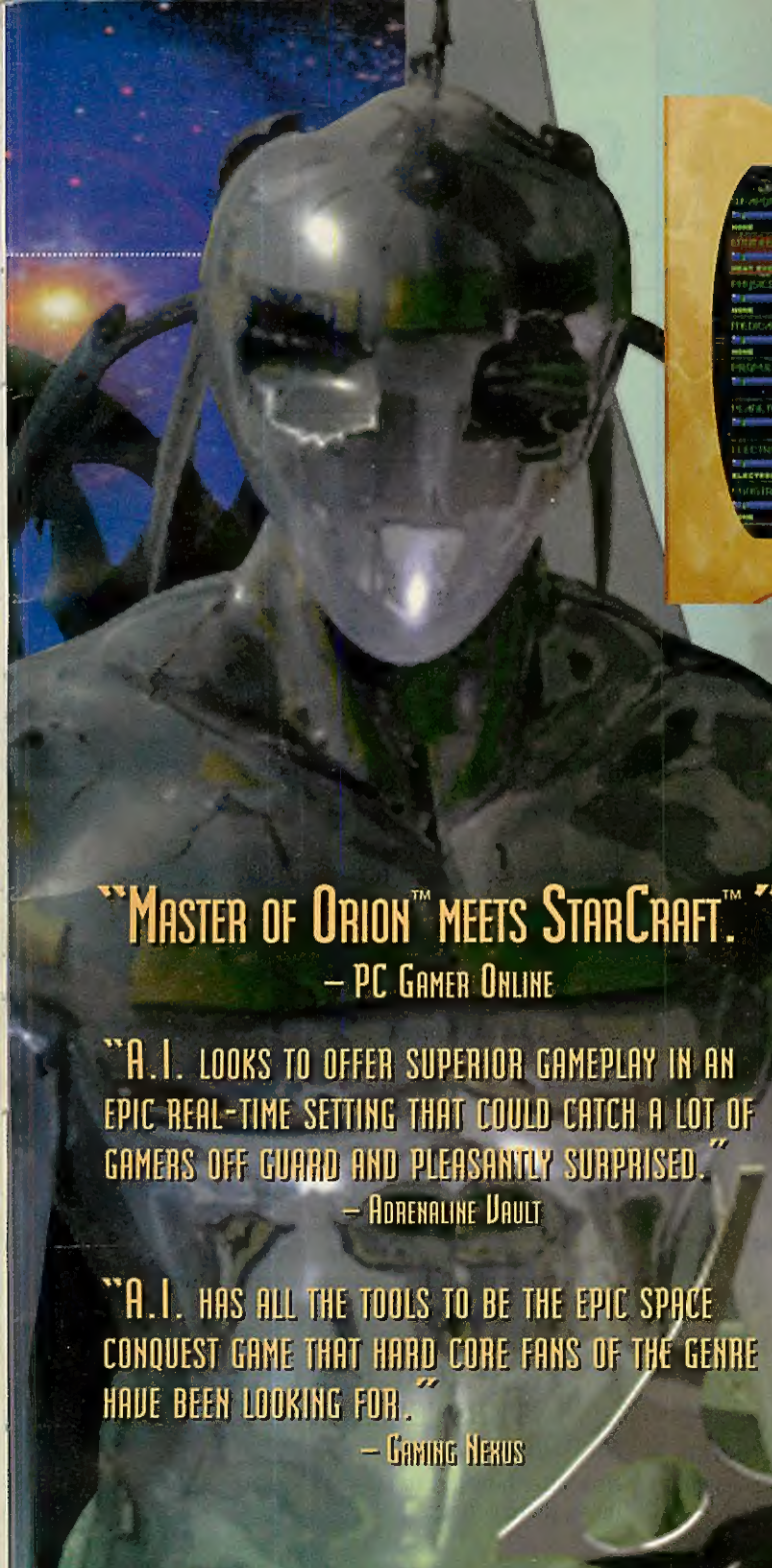
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COVER: A warning from artist John Berkey on the dangers of space. ABOVE: Vincent DiFate's *Infinite Worlds* is the most comprehensive look at the SF art work yet. Turn to page 76 for a closer look.

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

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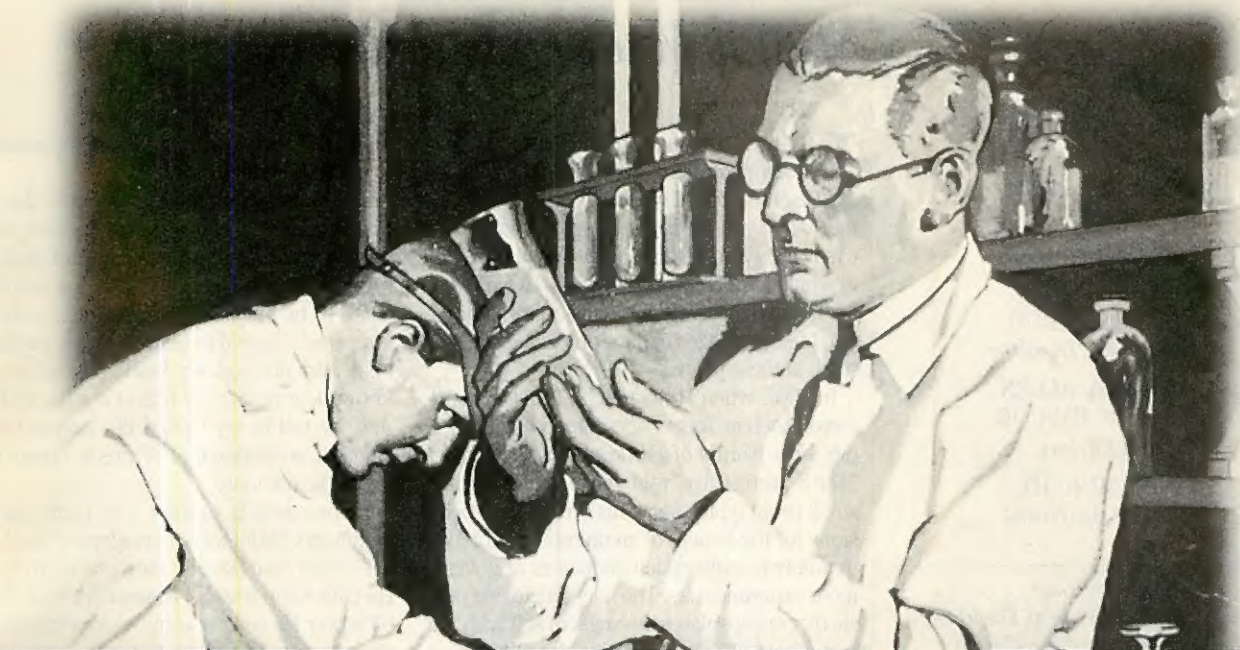
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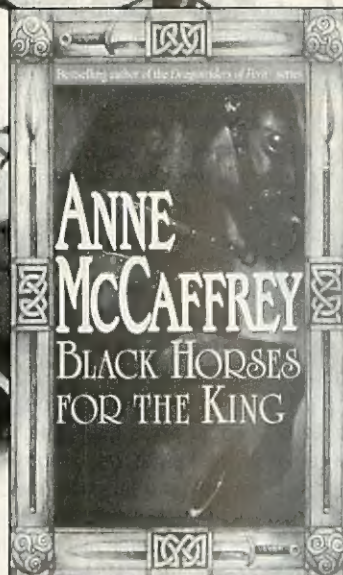
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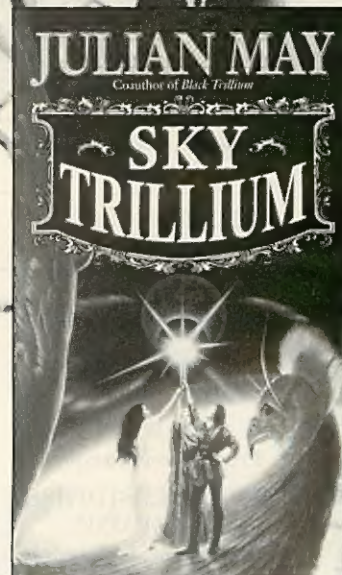
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EDITORIAL

The stuff *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* is made of.

I HAVE LONG ADMIRERD THE PASSIONATE AND uncompromising work of Thomas M. Disch. I will tell you a little bit of why so that when you get to the meat of what I have to say here you will understand the high regard in which I hold him and his work. He has written many rich novels and classic short stories, and I feel privileged to have published some of them in these pages.

In 1967, when I was but 12, I first encountered Disch in Terry Carr's paperback anthology *New Worlds of Fantasy*. His short story "The Squirrel Cage" told of a man trapped in a small room typing away his dreams and delusions for the benefit of an unknown audience that may be either alien abductors or government experimenters. The tale is a moving puzzle that encapsulates the angst of self with the metaphors of Science Fiction. It still remains one of my favorite short stories.

In 1979, I attended the Clarion SF Writers Workshop in East Lansing, Michigan. One of the great motivators in getting me to apply that year was the knowledge that Disch would be one of the six teachers there. When on our first meeting I started to tell him that a story of his had moved me greatly, he guessed, before I could share any details, that it had been "The Squirrel Cage." He already knew that it had that affect on readers. Of all the instructors at the six-week course, it was Disch whose words forced me to grow.

In 1984, when I was editing and publishing *Last Wave*, a small press magazine, I interviewed Disch at length on, among other things, his ambivalent relationship with Science Fiction, and the hotly mixed reception received by his novels such as *On Wings of Song* and *The Genocides*. "My basic attitude," he told me, "is that I am saying things that people don't want to hear because they're home truths."

But now, in 1998, I'm afraid that instead of issuing a trumpet call to alert you to attend to his words, I want to sound a klaxon to warn you away from his latest tome, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*, for he has written a dangerous book. At this late date I appear to have become one of those people who do not want to hear what he claims as truth.

Disch's central thesis is that SF is a stunted genre, that it is better suited for children than for thinking adults. It is not, as his own work shows. But while I look at the best of what we do, and wish we did it more often, it seems that Disch now looks at the worst of us and wishes to pretend that there is nothing better. Worse, he seems to shade his evidence to suit his argu-

ment, rather than sifting through the evidence to arrive at a found truth.

The book strikes a false note from the very first sentence of the very first chapter, when he states that, "America is a nation of liars, and for that reason science fiction has a special claim to be our national literature, as the art form best adapted to telling the lies we like to hear and pretend we believe." But as you know, dear reader, *all* fiction is a pack of lies that we tell to try to find the deeper truths beneath, so stating that SF lies is a mere stating of the obvious.

He proceeds from there with many skewed comments. He informs his readers of "hard core SF," rather than Hard SF, the name we truly use. He calls Grandmaster Lester del Rey a minor SF writer. He devotes chapters to setting up the straw men of UFOs and Watergate, using them to blast SF. (Yet what has this to do with us?)

But what bothered me most was his misrepresentation of what he calls "SF fandom's motto": "Reality is a crutch." This example gets to the heart of the problem with the book. Disch presents the phrase that way, with no elaboration, to show us in a bad light, and I must admit that if I had not already known better, I myself might have thought, "Why those closed-minded, elitist, snobbish SF fans!" But there is much more to it than that.

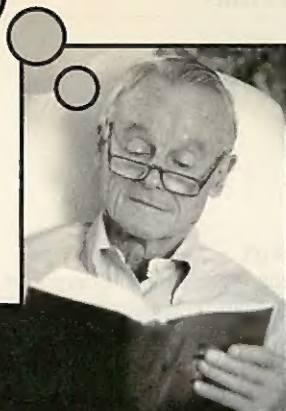
The phrase is not one of attack; it is instead one of self-defense. Tired of being maligned by those who dislike SF with the phrase "Science Fiction is a crutch for those who cannot handle reality," fans mockingly turned it on its head, and eventually shortened it to "Reality is a crutch," which I have seen on buttons for sale at SF conventions around the world.

The lack of this backstory information is a telling void. Either Disch knows the history of this phrase and is failing to share it with you by choice, so that he can continue to support his central thesis, or else he is unaware of the phrase's lineage and is therefore less of a "consummate insider" than the press release accompanying the book claims. Whatever the reason, whether the former's manipulation or the latter's ignorance, it sadly makes this book damaged goods. Because I am then forced to ask myself: What other half-truths does the book hide of which I may be unaware? True insiders will know better than to believe, but my fear is that newcomers seeking the answer might be naively misinformed. We must do our best to make sure that they do not accept as gospel what is merely apocrypha. We must do our best to save them from that.

Scott Edelman

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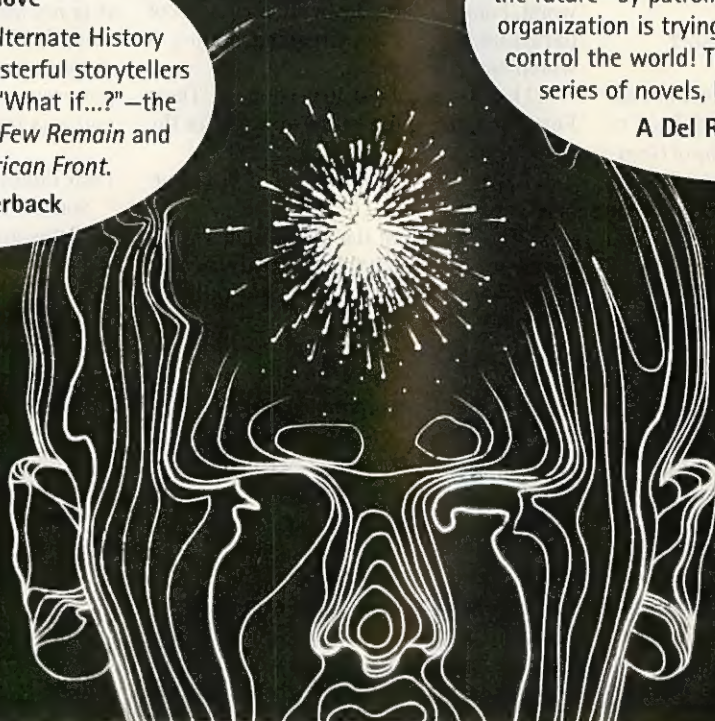
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Dear Scott:

As editor emeritus of *ComputerUser* magazine, I really empathized with your descriptions of editors' desks and tubs of incoming mail... You penned a very accurate description of the workload of the average editor!

I also appreciate your focus on bringing us new writers, and good writers (selling the steak, not the sizzle). I'm regularly impressed with the originality and poignancy of the stories I find in *SF Age*, and I wanted to thank you personally for doing such a great job.

Steve Deyo

Dear Scott:

It is a catastrophe, the "infrequency" of how much current material Gardner Dozois and Stanley Schmidt have donated to us since their editorial seeds have been planted, but I find that your admonishment focused on other editors possessed by the editorial regiment might have a capitalist ulterior motive: Sovereign Media vs. Dells' Cross-town Publications. I hope not. It would be most tragic if the chief enemy of progress, *capitalism*, were sinking its teeth into tomorrow's pre-eminent visions of stellar utopia. I pray that for the preservation of progress, your only intent was to stir back the ganglia of two of SF's most enterprising minds.

Christopher Exner

I admonished no one, Christopher. I merely noted a sad phenomenon that goes back to SF's earliest days. The fact that some of Gardner Dozois' short stories are among my favorite SF tales, and that I long for more in a similar vein, should not be held against me.

Dear Editor:

Whoops! It must have been (almost) 20 years since Mr. Paul Di Filippo has read any of the Earthclan books. As a longtime fan of David Brin's style and story line, I have read and reread each of his Uplift books at least once each year since their debut. I can certainly sympathize with Di Filippo's job of ingesting so many new stories and then relating it to what he had already read, but we do rely on you to have done your homework.

This whole concept of *Uplift* was always predicated on the theory that galactic migrations were the way that Earth had been "fallow" long enough for a new species to "bootstrap" itself into sapience (this theory is, however, still in dispute among the Galactics). Even in *Startide Rising* there was mention of the Hydrogen Breathers and Machine Intelligences who shared the galaxy with the

Oxygen Breathers. Did someone skip over the italicized sections, or skip through when someone was "thinking"?

While comparison to Gregory Benford and Vernor Vinge are certainly a favorable comparison, I do not feel that it is a quantitative comparison. (Are the Borg a quantitative comparison to Asimov's robots, or more so to Fred Saberhagen's Berserkers?)

I always take my time and reread your book reviews before, during, and after I delve into the books you feature. While I don't always agree with each review, I enjoy the points of view and the alternatives they present to me. Keep up the good work, I look forward to more and better.

Ann Ketron

Dear Editor:

Re: Books: I have been a fan of Miles Vorkosigan for years. Have you noticed that Bujold has thought out the legal and moral ramifications of cloning as no one else has? It's in the background and she doesn't make much of it, but it's there.

Re: Stories: 1. "Coolhunting" is one of the best stories I've read this year.

2. "Jack Neck & the Worrybird" is the worst. I almost put it down after a couple of paragraphs, but I kept reading hoping it would improve. It didn't.

3. I have read at least 10 versions of "Deep Future," same ending (the first one in the '40s).

4. I liked the sting in the tail of "The Purchase of Earth."

5. "The Perigee of the Moon" didn't work as science fiction or as fantasy, partly because those standard-issue gray aliens are too much of a joke.

E.C. Fikso

If only you were talking baseball players, then I could feel satisfied—the .400 success ratio you cite would rank Science Fiction Age up there with Ted Williams. Let us know how you feel about next issue.

Dear *Science Fiction Age*:

I agree with you about the high quality of Mike Resnick's writing in your preview-excerpt from his new award-winning novel *Kirinyaga*, but when I read that line where the girl who wants to read called Kamari says, "I want to become circumcised, and bear many children for my husband, and till the fields of his shamba, and someday be cared for by my grandchildren," I was completely

shocked, because female circumcision in Arab and African cultures is so drop-dead horrific, that *nobody*, not even a religious fanatic female, would actually *want* it. Aside from the ridiculous excuse that it keeps married wives from straying by permanently crippling them sexually, removing their clitoris so that can never experience an orgasm, a lot of them die from the pain, blood loss, and infection incurred by the procedure being done with dirty knives or pieces of glass, without anesthetic, medical treatment, or even a doctor present.

Many would say that it's simply a cultural tradition. If so, then culture is the first excuse of the sadist... they don't want their women to even have any inadvertent enjoyment from sex, or anything else for that matter. Millions of Arab and African women have been circumcised like that, and it's an abomination long overdue for abolishment.

Bob Schreib, Jr.

A character's opinions should never be confused with those of the author, as Mike Resnick has written in his many essays about this controversial work. Depicting an unpleasant event that occurs in our world, or even having a character voice support for it is not the same as endorsing it on a personal level. From my reading of the tale, the author's feelings about the procedure mirror your own, and your horror at the story's sad end was intentional.

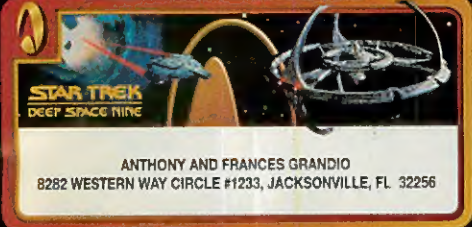
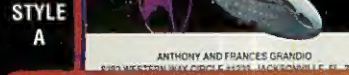
Dear Editor:

Sorry, but I am weary of stories like Jack Williamson's "The Purchase of Earth," making their great, ponderous point: the wicked, greedy Europeans getting their comeuppance for a history of enslaving, robbing and killing the aboriginal peoples they encountered. But if you cruise the history books a bit, you'll find instances of Native Americans enslaving and slaughtering each other, both before and after the coming of European colonists. Nobody was really innocent and I think it does readers a disservice to paint broad stereotypes when the truth is so much more complicated.

Barbara Schenck

But earlier crimes do not create license to commit later ones. As my mother used to say, "Two wrongs do not make a right."

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, 11305 Sunset Hills Road, Reston VA 20190. For e-mail, use scotttedelman@erols.com.



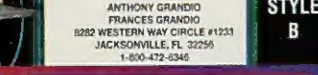
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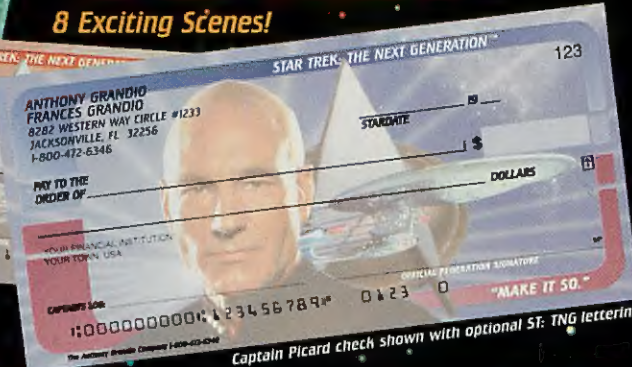
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BOOKS

By Mark W. Tiedemann, Paul Di Filippo, and Richard Parks

After a lifetime of stellar SF Silverberg has reached *The Alien Years*.



Once the aliens arrive, Silverberg doesn't think there will be an Independence Day. Art by Michael Herring.

IN HIS NEW NOVEL *THE ALIEN YEARS* ROBERT SILVERBERG takes on the whole question of invasion and resistance, and does so from what ought to be an obvious position—that if indeed aliens arrived here, sufficiently advanced and powerful enough to cross interstellar space and entertain the arrogance to conquer another world, what could we, in fact, do about it?

The question possesses a particular relevance in these post-Cold War days. In the brief time we have between the collapse of the defining tension of the 20th century and the onset of a new paradigm, there is breathing space to sit back and examine history from the perspective of our survival. That very survival complicates understanding since we tend to see it as emblematic of a kind of political, moral, and perhaps mythic superiority. But if we learn nothing else from history, it should be that its reduction to ideology is a fool's practice.

The novel opens "Seven Years From Now." Mike Carmichael is returning to LA from a week in the wilderness of New Mexico. He flies in during the dry season, hot Santa Ana winds blowing across the landscape, and

he knows there will probably be fires. He is used to doing his duty flying fire control during these times. And indeed the countryside is ablaze. But when he lands he learns that the fires were set by the landings of alien spacecraft. In fact, there are aliens wandering around highways and shopping malls—15-foot-tall ones that look not even remotely human. Mike is a practical guy, member of a family of tough-minded, practical people. He files the information, gets into a DC-3, and goes to fight fires. First things first.

But then he learns that his wife, Cindy, along with many others has been abducted by these aliens. Furthermore, she doesn't want to be released—she thinks they've come to save the world and she intends to be an ambassador to them.

Mike's brother, Anson, generally known as "The Colonel"—retired military and a specialist in non-Western psychology—sees the arrival of these aliens as an invasion. Washington calls him in, he looks at the information, and his opinion is that there is probably very little we can do. Look at the power these beings seem so casually to wield. His assessment proves correct.

The aliens shut off all the electricity on the planet. Only for a month, but the human race, by that single gesture, is conquered.

In the wake of such egofests as *Independence Day*, Silverberg's practicality and rationality come across like a bucket of ice water. As the years go by, and The Colonel organizes a resistance movement from the family ranch atop a mountain outside Santa Barbara, it becomes clearer and clearer that for all our achievements in technology and a long history of struggle against oppression to nourish our hopes and the myths of ultimate victory from which we draw our hero-images, the sheer power of these beings renders anything we might do ineffectual.

Silverberg runs the gamut: assassination attempts, strikes against installations, enclaves to keep the dream of freedom alive. He raises our cherished myths, spoon-fed us from childhood, and shows how, in this instance, none of them works.

At least, they don't work the way we think they should. Over the course of generations the Carmichaels maintain the resistance and keep the faith. Their success, however, is not in driving the aliens off the Earth, but in nurturing a human identity that is independent of them.

It has become political cant that invaders cannot hold a country against its will. America has had its adventures in imperialism from the Mexican-American War to Vietnam and in each instance we learned something about the nature of conquest and rebellion. In the case of Texas, most of the locals pretty much agreed that independence from Mexico was a good idea. We did not have to oppress them to win the territory. In the Philippines, we co-opted the insurgency—while all the shooting was going on, we gave them just about everything they wanted and thereby removed the causes of the

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insurrection. In Vietnam we learned that T.E. Lawrence was correct when he stated that the keeping and holding of territory is the only thing that risks losing to an insurgency—the Vietnamese largely gave up the land and kept the hearts and minds of their own people. These lessons and the lessons of others (not least of which is the British loss of the Colonies) have led us to believe that imperialism cannot work.

But in all these examples the conqueror's ambition is a key element. The conqueror who wants to own the hearts and minds of the conquered, who wants to co-opt the conquered culture, who wants to blend the defeated into the larger empire, who is inextricably concerned with those conquered, is a conqueror vulnerable to attack and failure. We have little experience with a conqueror who simply does not care.

The Alien Years is drenched with a pervasive indifference that Silverberg shows to be irresistible. The aliens are indifferent to human civilization. And as time goes by, people become indifferent to the radically altered landscape in which they must survive. Things have changed; go along with it or die.

Vietnam is a coda that runs through the novel. The Colonel derived most of his experience there and tries to use it as a template for the way to fight the aliens. The mistakes made, the faulty assessments, the preconceptions that undid the American effort there all comprise a foundation for the examination of how resistance movements work and how imperialism fails. And then he shows us a circumstance in which all those lessons become meaningless.

Science fiction has a long tradition of alien invasion stories, starting with H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, in which humanity also failed to defeat the invader. By now, though, we've gotten cozy with the idea that, if it really happened, we could defeat them. Good sci-fi always challenges preconceptions. But preconceptions die hard.

Silverberg shows us that, in the reassessment of history, preconceptions are really the first casualties.

Mark W. Tiedemann

Deepdrive, by Alexander Jablovok. Avon Eos, hardcover, \$14.00, 311 pages.

Mark my words: Twenty-five years from now, some sci-fi-loving teenager, as yet unborn, is going to approach you and ask, "Dear Wise Elderly Fan, what was it really like during SF's Second Golden Age, that decade of the nineties when authors such as Paul McAuley, Simon Ings, Stephen Baxter, Colin Greenland, Peter Hamilton, Greg Bear, William Barton, John Barnes, and Alexander Jablovok were revitalizing the core of SF? Did you and your peers realize then how lucky you were to read their books while still fresh? Was it apparent at the time that the seemingly ruined cosmic cathedrals built by Smith and Heinlein, Asimov and Anderson, van Vogt and Bester were being rebuilt from the inside out by enterprising young writers?" And you,

poor soul, unless you get your head out of the sand right now and quit bemoaning how there's no "real SF" around anymore, will be left speechless by this youngster's hind-insightful query.

There's a great article waiting to be written that would illustrate the thesis that space opera—arguably the core mode of SF—undergoes periodic cycles of glory, decay, and rebirth. Invented by Smith and Williamson and Campbell in the twenties and thirties, the form trailed off into cliché until re-engineered in the forties by the *Astounding* crew. Following their success, the space opera devolved once more, until the arrival of Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, Larry Niven's Known Space series, and the postmodern recastings of early Delany. Again, a trailing off until the arrival of Varley, Benford, and Sterling, presaging the flock of newest writers just mentioned.

But the place and time for that longish article is, unfortunately, not here and now. Today, we must focus on one excellent novel by one talented author: *Deepdrive*, by Alexander Jablovok. This book is a paragon of how to write truly state-of-the-art SF that is both respectful of past traditions and boldly revolutionary. Vivid, exciting, and thought-provoking, Jablovok's book will undoubtedly serve as a template for even newer writers in search of models to expand on.

Several centuries from now, our solar system has long been settled by 11 benevolent or neutral alien races that have filled various unexploited planetary and satellite niches, not excluding Earth itself. Naturally, humanity has been forever altered by this colonization, but not necessarily for the worse. For the most part, mankind flourishes, having adopted and adapted alien technology for its own purposes, striking up commensal relations with many of the new species of sentients. One piece of tech that the aliens will not willingly deliver, however, is their FTL unit, the deepdrive of the title. Without this crucial gadget, mankind is penned into the home system, a decidedly junior partner in the galactic firm of star-traveling races.

Jablovok's narrative concentrates on a few weeks of action revolving around the possibility that a small group of humans will finally secure a deepdrive. Stranded on a modified Venus full of strange ecologies yet still in the process of being remade is the alien called Ripi, lone representative of the Vronnan race. Rumor has it that Ripi owns or has stashed somewhere a functioning deepdrive. Upon Ripi converge several rival groups, all intent on securing the Vronnan's prize. The group Jablovok chooses to center his tale on is headed by Sophonisba Trost, a 50-year-old mercenary and "tech-hunter." As a protagonist, Soph is engagingly fleshed-out, a somewhat weary mother and wife who carries out her chosen job with failing enthusiasm. Confused and in doubt, Soph is nonetheless utterly competent, proving herself equal to the worst that the universe, aliens, and her fellow humans can toss into her path. Besides

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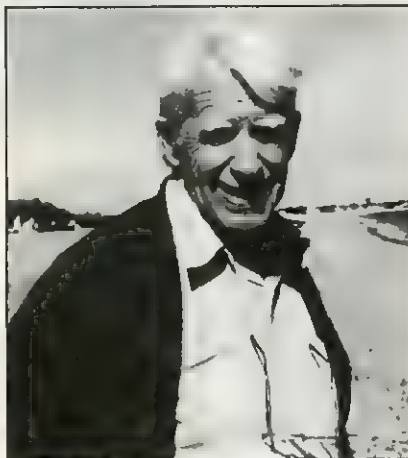
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Gordon Steele of Virginia, pictured above, is the latest Grand Prize Winner in The National Library of Poetry's North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. As the big winner, he was awarded \$1,000.00 in cash.

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Ripi—whose weird customs and physiology are intriguingly detailed—three humans are also swept up in her wake: Ambryn Chretien, black sheep of a powerful family, who now reads alien entrails for a living; Elward Bakst, a streetwise tough, who hides a surprising spiritual side; and mysterious war-orphaned Tiber, secretly raised to scarred manhood by the Vronnans themselves, who now pursues a perverse doom.

The first action-packed half of *Deepdrive* takes place almost exclusively on Venus, later on a ship in transit to Mercury, and then on that small hellish planet, where the aliens known as Gunners fire their enigmatic isotope packages into our primary, purpose unknown. A small interlude on Earth and in Lunar orbit follows, providing valuable clues and thrills. The climax occurs out toward Jupiter among several asteroids, where a battle between humans and aliens ends in a poignant mix of tragedy and success. But despite these necessarily limited real-time locales, Jablokov succeeds in delivering a rich and intense portrait of his altered solar system, through devious infodumps and character dialogue. His immensely complex backstory is fully under his control, and he doles out enough tasty tidbits of it to make a gourmet meal of speculation.

What truly astonishes about *Deepdrive* is Jablokov's determination to accept zero level of clichés. Every aspect of his future—from the hybrid mix of wet/dry biomechanical tech to the way people dress and live and work—has been patiently and ingeniously rethought. This determination to accept no sloppy secondhand speculation is reflected in Jablokov's precise, vibrant language. Almost never falling into a lecturing passive voice, Jablokov couches all his research and thought in streamlined, headlong prose embodied in well-constructed bite-sized sections. This book reads much cleaner than his equally complex but somewhat straitjacketed previous novel, *River of Dust* (1996). The publisher calls his style here "future-noir," and the term comes close to conveying Jablokov's enticing rush of prose and dizzying plot. But there's little hardboiled cynicism of the kind associated with stereotypical noir to mar this story.

Jablokov also has fun acknowledging his predecessors. Clearly, his alien-invasion scenario is an homage to Varley's Eight Worlds universe. The rescue of Tiber from a spacewreck recalls Gully Foyle's plight in Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1956). And at one point, Soph stops to prove offhandedly just how unlikely are any "theoretical massive structures...giant star-enclosing spheres, the millennial starships, the ringworlds, the planet-girdling constructions." With such an aside, Jablokov contributes to the ongoing conversation among SF authors by which novels evolve.

Employing humor and honest emotions to buttress his wildest SF conceits, Alexander Jablokov mortars a keystone

ROBERT A. MADLE

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Paul Di Filippo

Beaker's Dozen, by Nancy Kress. Tor Books, hardcover, 352 pages.

Nancy Kress is known as an Idea writer (Capital I with fanfare and flourishes) with a tendency toward polemic. I don't think the reader can find better examples of both traditions—often in the same story—as are found in *Beakers Dozen*. I also don't think there's a better capsule summary of both the potential rewards and pitfalls of either approach.

Kress starts the collection with her Hugo Award-winning "Beggars in Spain."

This is arguably Kress' most well known story, and it's also a good introduction to her fascination with biotech. As the story opens, Roger and Elizabeth Camden are meeting with a geneticist to order the enhancements they wish for their planned child, rather like a young couple of an earlier time might meet the architect of the house they wished to build. The enhancement that Roger—but not Elizabeth—wants most is *sleeplessness*. He gets his way, with one glitch: instead of a single daughter, two are conceived. One with the enhancement, Leisha, and one, Alice, without.

"Beggars in Spain" is mostly Leisha's story, as we are shown her life in jump-cuts of time

as she grows up, meets other Sleepless, and generally tries to apply sensible Yagaiist philosophies of contract and trade to the task of making her way in a world still dominated by Sleepers. She finds both love and resentment, a resentment that grows as more and more people become aware of the *Sleepless* and project, as they usually do, their fears and hatreds projected onto someone, anyone, who can be seen as "other." Kress' story takes Leisha full circle from joy and hope to despair and back again. She matures to the point she can finally find the flaws in her father's philosophy, and the man himself who could easily see how special Leisha was and yet com-

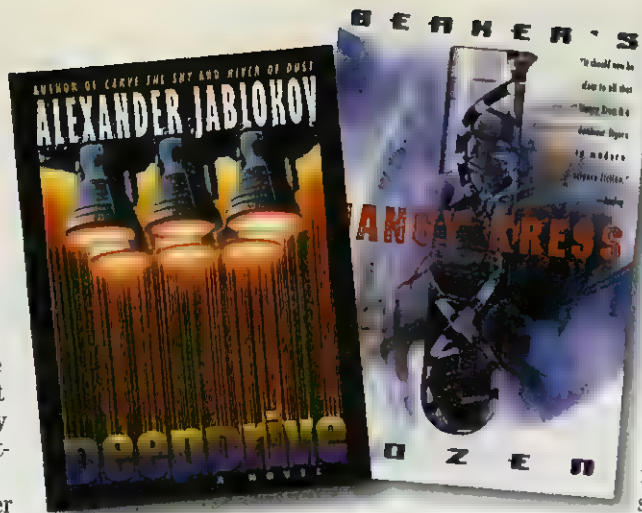
pletely miss a different kind of specialness in her sister Alice.

In "Feigenbaum Number," Kress moves from biology to chaos theory, with a smidgen of Platonic Ideal thrown in. Jack is a post-doc on a teaching fellowship, working on chaos theory, pursuing strange attractors. He also suffers from a bizarre sort of double-vision that always shows him both the real world and the ideal version of same at once.

It's an extremely disconcerting condition to say the least. Only the death of his beloved mentor and his chance meeting with another who shares the same condition shake him into an understanding of just what it all might mean.

Biological adjustments appear again in "Fault Lines." In this case the agent is a designer drug. Gene Shaunessy is a retired NY cop who now teaches at an inner-city school.

When several elderly couples die in apparent suicides, an old friend draws him into the case. The culprit is apparently J-24, a drug that facilitates emotional bonding between people, the so-called "perfect union" that human beings supposedly strive for. It's not that simple, of course. Gene doesn't really solve the case as such; he just finds an answer he can live with. In his case, the answer is a less perfect union. That's the central irony:



Danger Will Robinson! New Stamps Create Galactic Stamp-ede!

Warning! Warning! These Limited Edition Lost in Space stamps are red-hot

Owings Mills, Maryland — Science fiction fans and collectors are suddenly scrambling to obtain a new Limited Edition 9 Stamp set that has been issued by the Togolaise Republic to commemorate New Line Cinema's latest blockbuster, *Lost in Space*. The film is based on one of the most popular television shows of the 1960s.

"Collector demand for these stamps has been unbelievable," stated John Van Emden of ICS, distributor of the stamps. "*Lost in Space* is one of the most recognizable and popular TV shows of all time. Who can forget 'Danger, Will Robinson'? Collectors know that this is their first and only opportunity to get actual government issued Legal Tender stamps that are both beautiful and rare. In fact, we're nearly sold out."

Collectors are already predicting that in the very near future these *Lost in Space* stamps will be far more sought after and desirable than the U.S. Elvis stamp, the most popular commemorative issue of all time.

Visit us at: www.icscollectibles.com

"Over 500 million Elvis stamps have been released. When you compare that to these *Lost in Space* stamps, which are issued in a strictly Limited Edition of just thousands worldwide, you can see the irresistible appeal that these stamps have for collectors," added Van Emden.

Each of the nine colorful stamps features a portrait of an original cast member. Each stamp is about four times the size of a regular U.S. postage stamp. They're legal for postage in the Togolaise Republic and are recognized by every postal authority around the world.

Gotta have 'em? They are available for a short time at \$9.95 (plus \$3 p&h) for the complete set of nine colorful stamps, accompanied by a Certificate of Authenticity and the free pocket guide, "99 Little Known Facts About *Lost in Space*." The most you can buy is six sets. Send your check or money order to ICS, 3600 Crondall Lane, Suite 100FASP, Owings Mills, MD 21117. To order by credit card, call toll free 1-800-805-0561.



Collectors race to get colorful new stamps honoring *Lost in Space*.

human beings want connection, yet it is precisely this lack of connection that allows the protagonist to cope.

"Grant us this Day." God as an art student competing for a grant on the basis of Creation, perhaps destined to repeat the Crucifixion as a set piece. Kress, in her introduction, says no one got what the story was really about. I'm sure I didn't either.

"Flowers of Aulit Prison." Aliens on the planet called "World" base society on the concept of a consensus reality that only "real" people share. So what happens when the basis of that consensus is undermined? Which counts more, the reality or the consensus? When Uli Pek Bengarin is convicted of a crime she may or may not have committed and is thus made "unreal," that is the question she must answer as best she can.

There are thirteen stories all told. In the best of the works we get both social consciousness and the play of ideas in a narrative carried by a sympathetic character. I think this is the aspect of "Beggars in Spain"

that makes it work so well. Tell a human being about a tragedy or injustice and they will certainly agree that either is a bad thing. Show them the same thing through the eyes of someone living it, let them, if only for a little while, become that character, and that same injustice hits on an emotional level that mere facts never reach.

Whether this tendency to see the universal only through the specific is a strength of the species or a flaw is another question, but the tendency is there. In the less successful of the stories ("Evolution" or "Sex Education," for example) that character is the missing element. Here Kress puts her protagonists and everyone around them through a great deal of tragedy and suffering, almost to the point where empathy should be automatic. It never is. No matter how much Sturm and Drang surrounds the characters their pain is just as cerebral as the ideas Kress expresses through them. Here as in her more successful pieces Kress writes skillfully, ideates originally,

Continued on page 96

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

Shiva in Steel, by Fred Saberhagen (Tor). The Berserkers are back, those intelligent machines dedicated to destroying all organic life in the universe. In this latest installment, chaos ensues when a Berserker begins to make war as none has before.

Ribofunk, by Paul Di Filippo (Avon Eos). Beyond the subgenres of cyberpunk and steampunk stands *Ribofunk*, a strange future of gene-spliced madness. The classic collection has finally been given a well-deserved mass market edition so even more can be infected by Di Filippo's talent.

Antarctica, by Kim Stanley Robinson (Bantam). James Cameron, looking for his next epic to lens, recently optioned Robinson's massive Mars trilogy, the finest tale of the colonization of the red planet yet written. Venture with the author now for a dramatic trip to Earth's most alien place.

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds, edited by Dean Wesley Smith (Pocket). Thousands of hopeful beginning writers submitted their tales featuring the characters from all four *Star Trek* series. This volume contains 18 short stories featuring the best adventures of the quartet of crews.

Aftermath, by Charles Sheffield (Tor). The multiple award-winning Sheffield again delivers Hard SF at its finest, with this tale of an Alpha Centauri supernova that threatens not only the future of Earth, and our manned Mars expedition as well.

Alternate Generals, edited by Harry Turtledove (Baen). The master of alternate histories joins other SF writers on a tour of otherworldly warfare. Esther Friesner, Elizabeth Moon, S. M. Stirling and others provide tales might-have-been.

Dark Tales and Light, by Bruce Boston (Dark Regions Press). The latest collection from this prolific author/poet features ten short stories that run the gamut from SF to Fantasy to Horror. If his all-too-infrequent appearances in our pages have left you hungering for more, track this one down.

The Joy of Trek, by Sam Ramer (Baen). A witty self-help book that purports to help the mundanes learn how to deal with their relationships with *Star Trek* fans. If you're an SF fan who has the ability to laugh at yourself, then perhaps you should slip this to your significant other.

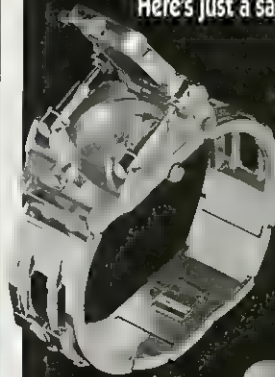
Ai! Pedrito!, by L. Ron Hubbard and Kevin J. Anderson (Bridge Publications). A short story by the former is transformed into a novel by the latter. Based on exploits in the life of the former pulp writer turned inventor of Scientology.

This is the Year Zero, by Andrew Weiner (Pottersfield Press). A collection of the author's finest short pieces. Harlan Ellison, has called him "a wonderful storyteller." We agree—Weiner is one of our best.

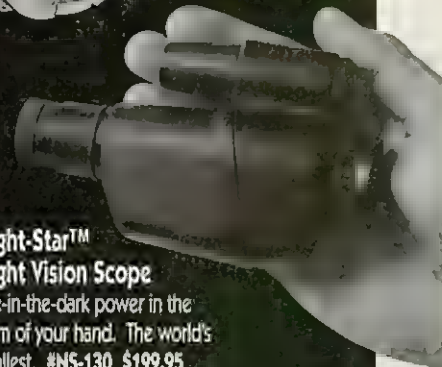


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EARLY LIFE ON MARS

SINCE THE DAYS OF PERCIVAL LOWELL, Mars has been a favorite location for hypothetical extraterrestrial life. By the late 1960s, however, much was known about Mars to make the "virtually any possibility of advanced life on Mars" the "most likely" scenario. The atmosphere was too thin for life; the planet was simply too cold, and there were no hardy organisms to escape the surface. But what about microorganisms buried in advanced oceans? And what about the harshest conditions found on Earth, such as superheated, acidic, and salty "hydrothermal vents" on the ocean abyss, and the frigid, toxic dry valleys of Antarctica. Could similar organisms flourish in Mars? Life science experiments significantly reduced the Martian possibility. Peculiar results of organic compounds in the Martian regolith, and the results of other experiments done over the highly oxidized state of Mars, could be the planet's history? In the past, Mars has been the most interesting planet in the solar system.

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12

Mars 12

FIENDS

2

March 30 2008

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SOLDAY

MERCURYDAY

VENUS

SOLDAY

Hera was the supreme goddess of the Greeks. As a daughter of Zeus, whom she gave birth to Ares, Hecate and Hephaestus. To worship her in Athens, such as those at Saron. Several of the earliest Greek temples were dedicated to her, such as those at Saron. Several of the earliest Greek temples were dedicated to her, such as those at Saron. Several of the earliest Greek temples were dedicated to her, such as those at Saron.

Martian CHRONICLE

JAMES M. GRAHAM • KANDIS ELLIOT

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1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031, 2032, 2033, 2034, 2035, 2036, 2037, 2038, 2039, 2040, 2041, 2042, 2043, 2044, 2045, 2046, 2047, 2048, 2049, 2050, 2051, 2052, 2053, 2054, 2055, 2056, 2057, 2058, 2059, 2060, 2061, 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067, 2068, 2069, 2070, 2071, 2072, 2073, 2074, 2075, 2076, 2077, 2078, 2079, 2080, 2081, 2082, 2083, 2084, 2085, 2086, 2087, 2088, 2089, 2090, 2091, 2092, 2093, 2094, 2095, 2096, 2097, 2098, 2099, 2100, 2101, 2102, 2103, 2104, 2105, 2106, 2107, 2108, 2109, 2110, 2111, 2112, 2113, 2114, 2115, 2116, 2117, 2118, 2119, 2120, 2121, 2122, 2123, 2124, 2125, 2126, 2127, 2128, 2129, 2130, 2131, 2132, 2133, 2134, 2135, 2136, 2137, 2138, 2139, 2140, 2141, 2142, 2143, 2144, 2145, 2146, 2147, 2148, 2149, 2150, 2151, 2152, 2153, 2154, 2155, 2156, 2157, 2158, 2159, 2160, 2161, 2162, 2163, 2164, 2165, 2166, 2167, 2168, 2169, 2170, 2171, 2172, 2173, 2174, 2175, 2176, 2177, 2178, 2179, 2180, 2181, 2182, 2183, 2184, 2185, 2186, 2187, 2188, 2189, 2190, 2191, 2192, 2193, 2194, 2195, 2196, 2197, 2198, 2199, 2200, 2201, 2202, 2203, 2204, 2205, 2206, 2207, 2208, 2209, 2210, 2211, 2212, 2213, 2214, 2215, 2216, 2217, 2218, 2219, 2220, 2221, 2222, 2223, 2224, 2225, 2226, 2227, 2228, 2229, 2230, 2231, 2232, 2233, 2234, 2235, 2236, 2237, 2238, 2239, 2240, 2241, 2242, 2243, 2244, 2245, 2246, 2247, 2248, 2249, 2250, 2251, 2252, 2253, 2254, 2255, 2256, 2257, 2258, 2259, 2260, 2261, 2262, 2263, 2264, 2265, 2266, 2267, 2268, 2269, 2270, 2271, 2272, 2273, 2274, 2275, 2276, 2277, 2278, 2279, 2280, 2281, 2282, 2283, 2284, 2285, 2286, 2287, 2288, 2289, 2290, 2291, 2292, 2293, 2294, 2295, 2296, 2297, 2298, 2299, 2300, 2301, 2302, 2303, 2304, 2305, 2306, 2307, 2308, 2309, 2310, 2311, 2312, 2313, 2314, 2315, 2316, 2317, 2318, 2319, 2320, 2321, 2322, 2323, 2324, 2325, 2326, 2327, 2328, 2329, 2330, 2331, 2332, 2333, 2334, 2335, 2336, 2337, 2338, 2339, 2340, 2341, 2342, 2343, 2344, 2345, 2346, 2347, 2348, 2349, 2350, 2351, 2352, 2353, 2354, 2355, 2356, 2357, 2358, 2359, 2360, 2361, 2362, 2363, 2364, 2365, 2366, 2367, 2368, 2369, 2370, 2371, 2372, 2373, 2374, 2375, 2376, 2377, 2378, 2379, 2380, 2381, 2382, 2383, 2384, 2385, 2386, 2387, 2388, 2389, 2390, 2391, 2392, 2393, 2394, 2395, 2396, 2397, 2398, 2399, 2400, 2401, 2402, 2403, 2404, 2405, 2406, 2407, 2408, 2409, 2410, 2411, 2412, 2413, 2414, 2415, 2416, 2417, 2418, 2419, 2420, 2421, 2422, 2423, 2424, 2425, 2426, 2427, 2428, 2429, 2430, 2431, 2432, 2433, 2434, 2435, 2436, 2437, 2438, 2439, 2440, 2441, 2442, 2443, 2444, 2445, 2446, 2447, 2448, 2449, 2450, 2451, 2452, 2453, 2454, 2455, 2456, 2457, 2458, 2459, 2460, 2461, 2462, 2463, 2464, 2465, 2466, 2467, 2468, 2469, 2470, 2471, 2472, 2473, 2474, 2475, 2476, 2477, 2478, 2479, 2480, 2481, 2482, 2483, 2484, 2485, 2486, 2487, 2488, 2489, 2490, 2491, 2492, 2493, 2494, 2495, 2496, 2497, 2498, 2499, 2500, 2501, 2502, 2503, 2504, 2505, 2506, 2507, 2508, 2509, 2510, 2511, 2512, 2513, 2514, 2515, 2516, 2517, 2518, 2519, 2520, 2521, 2522, 2523, 2524, 2525, 2526, 2527, 2528, 2529, 2530, 2531, 2532, 2533, 2534, 2535, 2536, 2537, 2538, 2539, 2540, 2541, 2542, 2543, 2544, 2545, 2546, 2547, 2548, 2549, 2550, 2551, 2552, 2553, 2554, 2555, 2556, 2557, 2558, 2559, 2560, 2561, 2562, 2563, 2564, 2565, 2566, 2567, 2568, 2569, 2570, 2571, 2572, 2573, 2574, 2575, 2576, 2577, 2578, 2579, 2580, 2581, 2582, 2583, 2584, 2585, 2586, 2587, 2588, 2589, 2590, 2591, 2592, 2593, 2594, 2595, 2596, 2597, 2598, 2599, 2600, 2601, 2602, 2603, 2604, 2605, 2606, 2607, 2608, 2609, 2610, 2611, 2612, 2613, 2614, 2615, 2616, 2617, 2618, 2619, 2620, 2621, 2622, 2623, 2624, 2625, 2626, 2627, 2628, 2629, 2630, 2631, 2632, 2633, 2634, 2635, 2636, 2637, 2638, 2639, 2640, 2641, 2642, 2643, 2644, 2645, 2646, 2647, 2648, 2649, 2650, 2651, 2652, 2653, 2654, 2655, 2656, 2657, 2658, 2659, 2660, 2661, 2662, 2663, 2664, 2665, 2666, 2667, 2668, 2669, 2670, 2671, 2672, 2673, 2674, 2675, 2676, 2677, 2678, 2679, 26

NAME: MARIA LUISA AGUIAR 12.28

Ever sit back and contemplate what life would be like on Mars? Not just the details of futuristic space equipment needed to make the trip or the life-preserving technology needed to live there, but *every day* life? James M. Graham, Kandis Elliot, and the Institute of Implied Science give us a glimpse of that future with *Millennium Mars*. This large-format (11"x17"), spiral-bound Earth/Mars calendar offers detailed information ranging from the red planet's history to the specifics of terraforming its surface to fully support human life. Detailed, full-color illustrations reveal the beautiful Martian landscapes of today as well as those of a colonized Mars of the 21st century. Best of all, this collectible is a fully functioning calendar spanning one Mars year while also keeping track of the concurrent passage of Earth time from December 20, 1999 through February 1, 2002. Generations from now such a calendar will be necessary for Martian colonists to survive, and to communicate with Terrans. Why wait until then, when you can have an artifact from the

future today? For further information, visit the manufacturer's Web site at www.tomorrowsf.com/market/mars/welcome.html.

X-PRIZE Marks the Spot

Yesterday's Science Fiction promised us a future that never came. By the last decade of this century, we were all supposed to be living in a future where common, everyday citizens like you and me can travel to the stars and back for a weekend vacation. (At an affordable price, no less!) This is the vision we still cling to when we look at the stars.

Thanks to a non-profit organization called the X-PRIZE Foundation, that vision may be one step

closer to reality. In order to

jump-start the commercial space tourism industry, they've launched one of history's most unusual sweepstakes. Recognizing that since the beginning of aviation, advances in flight technology have occurred spurred on by prizes, they are offering \$10,000,000 to the first team to meet the following mission guidelines: The spacecraft must be privately financed and built, and must carry at least one person (with the potential capacity for three) to a minimum of 62 miles above the Earth. The trip must be made twice within a 14 day period. More than a dozen teams have already taken up the gauntlet and registered for the challenge. You could be on one of those first flights if you register for a *Your Ticket to Space Visa* which enters you in a sweepstakes every time you use your Visa, and perhaps win one of nearly 1,000 prizes, including a ride on a supersonic Russian MiG-25, a zero-gravity flight, or a trip into sub-orbital space! World-famous author Arthur C. Clarke thinks "the X-PRIZE... will do for astronautics what Charles Lindbergh did for aviation in 1927." For information, check out their website: www.xprize.org.



AUDIO

LISTENING SPACE

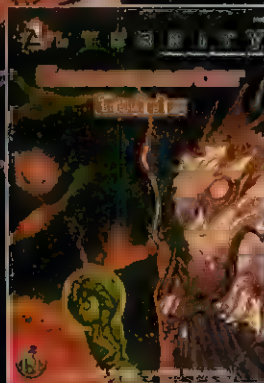
Yesterday's and tomorrow's masters meet on two decidedly different dramatized offerings. First off is a tale hailed as one of the greatest science fiction stories of all time, Stanley Weinbaum's 1934 "Martian Odyssey," making its way to audio courtesy of Star Quest Entertainment. When a Martian exploratory scout ship crashes in a meteor crater near the Ares Vallis, a stranded spaceman must journey on foot across the unrelenting landscape of the red planet to reach his mothership. On the way, he meets several unusual life forms, including Tweel, a native of Mars who in the original text version was the first to teach SF fans just how alien aliens can be. You can contact the creators at sci-fi-audio@genie.com. Proving that today's finest SF writers can compete with those who came before, Lois McMaster Bujold's 1986 masterpiece *The Warrior's Apprentice* comes to life in the audio realm for the first time from The Reader's Chair. This is the latest

tale of Miles Vorkosigan, who in this adventure creates an alternate identity for himself as a mercenary in order to steal a shipment of weapons destined for a warzone. Visit The Reader's Chair Web site at www.readerschair.com.





ALTERNITY UNIVERSE



When you close your eyes and imagine the future, what is it that you see? An era of successful interplanetary colonization and peaceful communication with alien species, with millions of jeweled planets fanning out before us in space? Or do you divine a darker future, an age of maddening intolerance and endless war, with constant chaos born of technology run wild? SF has dreamed many futures into existence, and TSR's recently released *Altermity Science Fiction Roleplaying Game* allows you to live in whichever of those futures you desire. Now they've made it even easier to play out the future's possibilities today with the *Altermity Gamemaster Guide*.

Learn how to command the realities of all the alternate tomorrows (and keep your rowdy gamers under control), limited only by your imagination! The 256-page *Gamemaster Guide* is a tome of knowledge essential for any *Altermity* adventure or campaign. It offers helpful hints for narrating a scene, pacing the game, moderating discussions between players, creating aliens, and using optional rules. For further information, check out their Web-site at [www.TSR.com](http://www TSR.com).

NEW ON VIDEO

Scream, Too

What's your favorite scary movie? Perhaps one of the new video offerings below:

>Dark City: After his success with *The Crow*, director Alex Proyas began to populate a paranoid city full of conspiracies so deep and primal that they make the machinations on *The X-Files* look like kindergarten. Rufus Sewell, Kiefer Sutherland, Jennifer Connelly, and William Hurt star in an SF nightmare of those who dream the world into being. The DVD release features special audio tracks with director Proyas and critic and SF fan Roger Ebert.

>The Postman: Love them or hate them, one thing cannot be denied—Kevin Costner sure does love starring in those SF and fantasy flicks. After *Field of Dreams* and *Waterworld*, he transformed David Brin's classic post-apocalypse novel into a film that was not as bad as originally claimed. If you passed it by in the theaters, as the gross receipts indicated you probably did, it's worth a look now.

>Scream 2: Wes Craven and Kevin Williamson—the team responsible for revitalizing the horror film—have done it again, with a sequel that spirals around a film made from a book of the events of

the first film. Hip and self-referential, the duo is helped by a cast that includes *Buffy*'s Sarah Michelle Gellar, *Sliders*' Jerry O'Connell, *Friends*' Courtney Cox, *Roseanne*'s Laurie Metcalf... and Will Smith's Jada Pinkett. Proof that not all sequels are worthless.

>Sphere: A stellar cast brings to life yet another of Michael Crichton's SF bestsellers. Dustin Hoffman, Samuel L. Jackson, and Sharon Stone appear as three scientists who must come face to face with their deepest fears to unlock the secret behind what appears to be an alien spacecraft.

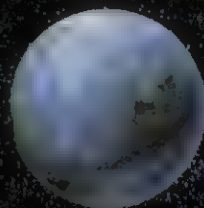
>The Sender: Michael Madson, who sprang to fame in that memorable scene from *Reservoir Dogs* in which an unwilling hostage gave him an earful, stars in this movie of an Earthling with extraterrestrial powers. Dyan Cannon and Robert Vaughn co-star in the tale of a career Navy pilot who discovers his daughter's unusual abili-



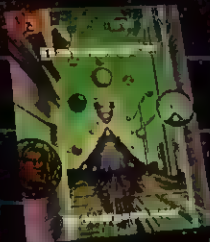
ties while investigating a government cover-up. Sure to appeal to fans of *The X-Files* and *Millennium*.

>The Day the Earth Stood Still: Four new films are being released under the umbrella of "Science Fiction Drive-In Classics" by Twentieth Century-Fox Home Entertainment. In addition to *The Day the Earth Stood Still*—one of the greatest SF movies ever made—the three other films also slated for release are *The Fly*, *The Alligator People*, and *The Lost World*.

PICK A LOCK LIGHT YEARS AWAY



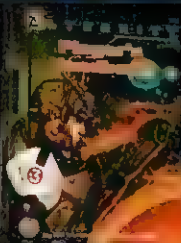
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TELEVISION

By Dan Perez

This Fall, SF series new and old go back to the future, the past, and deep space.



This Fall, UPN brings an *ER* into outer space with *Mercy Point* (above), and sends a CIA agent back in time with *Seven Days* (right).

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT THE television season is structured around the school season? In the fall, students return to school and new shows debut on TV. As winter and spring progress, semesters change and midseason replacements find their way to the small screen. Then comes summer vacation, and the dog days of television reruns, although if you're like me, you look forward to summer to catch up on some competing shows you might have missed in TV's busy schedule. Here's a glimpse of what science fiction fans can expect in the fall. (All times are Eastern Standard Time.)

On Mondays you can catch an all-new 22-episode season of *Sliders* on the Sci-Fi Channel at 9 PM and 1 AM. *Sliders* is the little SF show that could, surviving near-cancellations, channel-hopping, and defections from its cast. It's settled in nicely on the Sci-Fi Channel now, so catch Quinn, Maggie, Rembrandt and their new companion Colin as they keep on slidin'. If you're not into alternate realities, you might look into the second season of *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 9 pm) to see what all the fuss is about. This is last season's hit show, a surreal comedy-drama by producer David E.

Kelley, featuring Walter Mitty-esque fantasy sequences (including the now-famous dancing baby) drawn from the overactive mind of the title character, played by Calista Flockheart. This show's quirkiness will either tickle your fancy (as it did mine) or irritate the heck out of you, but either way it's fun to talk about the next day around the water cooler.

Tuesday at 8 PM we'll see the 3rd season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the WB network's first bona fide sci fi-hit. Fueled by good writing and intriguing characters (such as David Boreanaz's bad-boy vampire Angel), *Buffy* is rocking. Joss Whedon has wisely followed the model of *The X-Files* and *Babylon 5* by weaving an overall story arc through the individual episodes, giving the show added depth and resonance. The result is a show that can be viewed, depending on your mood and the episode, as guilty pleasure, serious drama, and sharp satire.

A strong season finale left fans thirsting (ahem) for more, and coincidentally enough, a movie based on the TV series is in the works. At 9 PM over on Fox, there's a new show called *Brimstone*, which stars Peter Horton (*Thirtysomething*) as a New York cop who avenges his wife's rape by murdering her attacker. Horton's character dies and goes to Hell, but the Devil (John Glover) makes him a deal he can't refuse: his redemption in exchange



for hunting down 113 demons who have escaped from Hell. Creating yet more VCR havoc at 9 PM on UPN will be *Mercy Point*, a new show starring Joe Morton which features a state-of-the-art hospital in deep space that caters to human and alien patients.

Wednesdays in the early fall we'll still be watching *Babylon 5* at 8 PM on TNT, since some original episodes of the 5th and final season were withheld over the summer as has been done in the past when the show was on UPN/PTEN. Some fans have complained that the early part of season 5 has been filler (the argument is that J.

9:01 PM

head for library to study for
finals

9:08 PM

run into fellow player with
wormhole showdown deck

12:53 AM

attempt Vulcan mind-meld to find
answers to test



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Michael Straczynski tied up all the loose ends in season 4 when season 5 was gravely in doubt), but Straczynski has addressed this in his frequent posts to the Internet:

"This was always a five-year story. All I did was move four episodes out of season five into season four so we could close up the Earth Civil War story and provide closure to that part of it if there wasn't a season five, isolating what was to be in five a bit.

"Once we got the go ahead for [season] five, I knew that this might be my last chance to experiment without anyone looking over my shoulder, in case *Crusade* didn't go and I ended up back at one of the networks (where intrusion and formula is the key). I wanted to do off-format shows like 'The Long Night of Londo Mollari,' and 'The Corps is Mother,' and 'A View from the Gallery.'

"The only way a writer learns is to try new things, and take the parts that work and add them to his toolbox. I saw here some opportunities to experiment, to try new things, to mess with the format... to change the show, and the show is about change. So I did so, and I'd do it again.

"There's *always* been a lull between major arcs in the show. Always. You need it in particular when you go to a daily strip syndication situation, for pacing. The problem is that on the one hand you have a lot of adrenaline junkies who think that unless there's a whole lot of stuff blowing up nothing's happening, and those who think that unless they know in advance that this is an arc episode, it's not an arc episode... unless you telegraph it literally and hugely they dismiss it.

"These are the same yahoos who were saying in year 1 that there was no arc at all, kept saying it right up until 'Signs and Portents,'

when finally I whacked them hard enough that even they could see it... and then, on the reruns on TNT, are now saying that the pieces were all there from the very, very start, they just didn't see them before.

"And they're falling for the same thing again.

"Without [knowing] what's going on in the first half of the season, the major stuff that happens in the second half of the season won't matter, wouldn't play as well, and wouldn't have the same impact. They are part and parcel. This was what I wanted to do with the fifth season, this is precisely what I worked out, and once again it has to do with process, and change, and how one new set of events rises out of the ashes of the last one.

"So basically, my reply to the hysterics and the whiners is this: when this season is over, and you see how it all lays out...then we'll talk. To say it ain't there before you know what's there, before you see the connections, is just plain stupid, and if they can complain to me about no arc, I can complain about their shortsightedness.

"Frankly, the remaining episodes of this season represent some of the very best work we've ever done, maybe even the best work we've done, but they wouldn't have NEARLY the impact they will have if we hadn't done what was done in the first half of this season."

A new 8 PM show from UPN, *Seven Days*, features Jonathan LaPaglia as a cast-off ex-CIA agent who must travel back in time on a clandestine mission to avert present-day disaster, and he's only got seven days to accomplish his task. More VCR wear and tear on Wednesday stems from NBC's *Third Rock From the Sun* (still punch-drunk from dueling with *The Drew Carey Show*) and UPN's *Star Trek: Voyager* competing for the 9 PM slot. Adding to your VCR woes on this night is a new 9 PM show

from WB called *Charmed*, in which Shannen Doherty, Holly Marie Combs, and Lori Loughlin play powerful good witches known as "The Charmed Ones."

Thursday on NBC is considerably less must-see now that *Seinfeld* has folded up its tents, so you might check out UPN's new *Way Out There Movie*, which will feature a different sci-fi and fantasy movie each week, at 8 PM.

On Friday, the teens will most likely be watching *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, which makes its return to ABC's TGIF lineup at 9 PM. Also at 9 pm, over on Fox, is Chris Carter's moody *Millennium*, set to go through yet another makeover (possibly under the full-time scrutiny of Carter himself—see below) in its continuing quest to snag more viewers.

Saturday, always a banner night for sci-fi, features the 10th season of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* on the Sci-Fi Channel at 5 and 11 PM. This is the show's third year on SFC, and we can look forward to plenty of hijinks from Mike and the 'bots. CBS chimes in with *Early Edition* in a new time slot at 8 PM. At 9 PM you can check out the return of *Fantasy Island* on ABC, starring Malcolm McDowell as Mr. Roarke and produced by Barry Sonnenfeld (*Get Shorty*). At 10 PM on ABC, Jeremy Piven, late of *Ellen*, plays the title role in *Cupid*, a romantic comedy about a guy who claims to be, well, Cupid. And late-night on TNT (usually 11 PM), hang with good ole boy Joe Bob Briggs as he hosts the best and the worst of sci-fi drive-in movies on *Monstervision*.

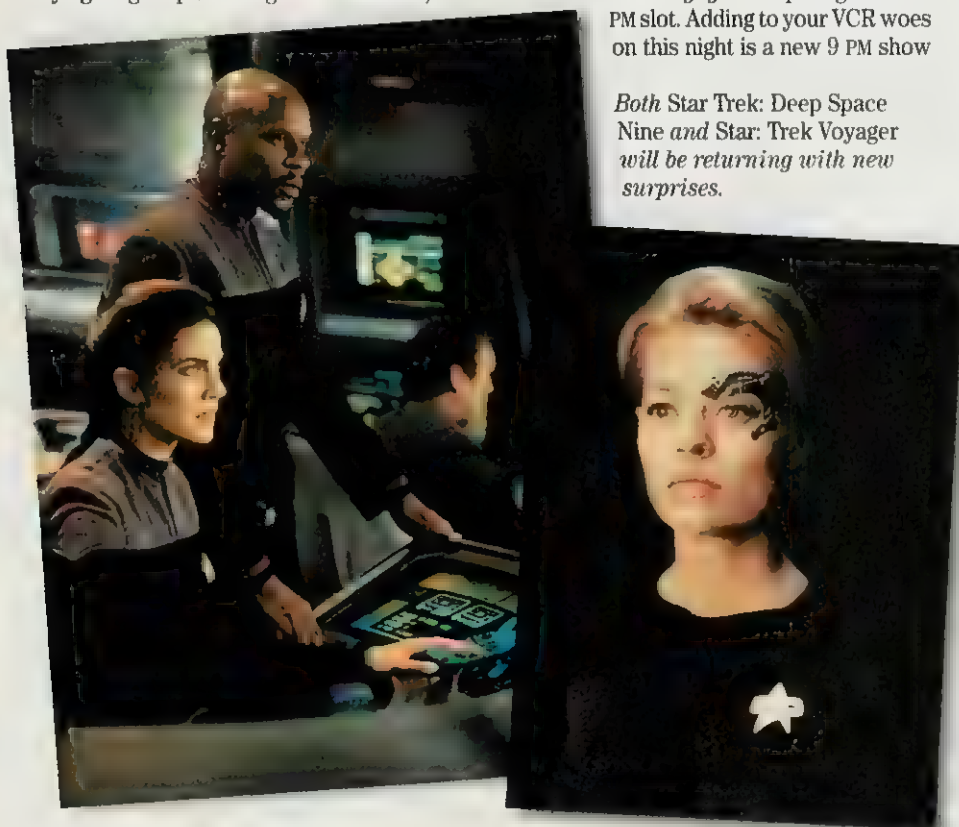
Sunday is, of course, *The X-Files* at 9 PM and nothing but. Season 6 of everyone's favorite scarefest is coming up, and big changes seem to be brewing with the show. To please his cast, creator Chris Carter has moved production for the show from Vancouver, B.C. to Los Angeles. But according to a *New York Daily News* report, David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson told reporters at a press conference in Los Angeles that they want to leave the show after the coming season. No other details were given, except that Duchovny has two years on his contract and Anderson has

three years on hers. Chris Carter has said that he sees the show going on for at least two more years. At press time, the movie has not yet been released, so it'll be interesting to see what effect the film's revelations have on the 6th season (and on the much-debated relationship between Mulder and Scully). There's also a rumor going around that Glen Morgan and James Wong (*Space: Above and Beyond*) will be helming *The X-Files*' 6th season, so Chris Carter can devote all his attention to revamping problem child *Millennium*. Will *X-Files* follow the lead of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and jump (at the height of its popularity) permanently to the big screen? Stay tuned.

ABC and Fox have socked away a couple of sci-fi shows for midseason replacements, so keep an eye peeled for *Strange Days*, about an ex-government worker struggling against chemical-weapon-induced disease

Continued on page 65

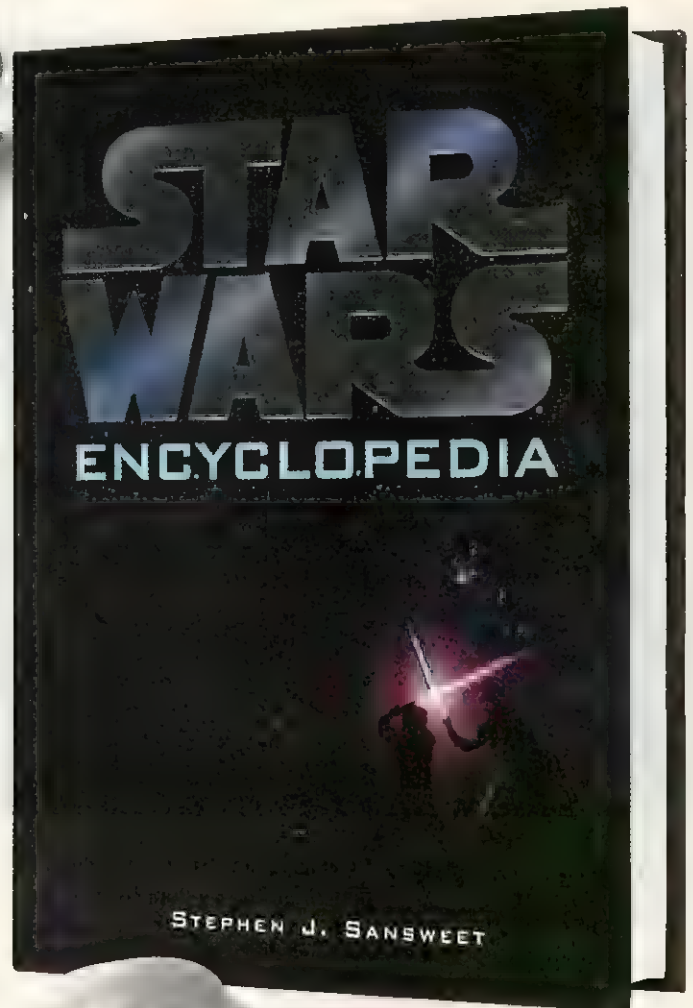
Both *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *Star Trek: Voyager* will be returning with new surprises.





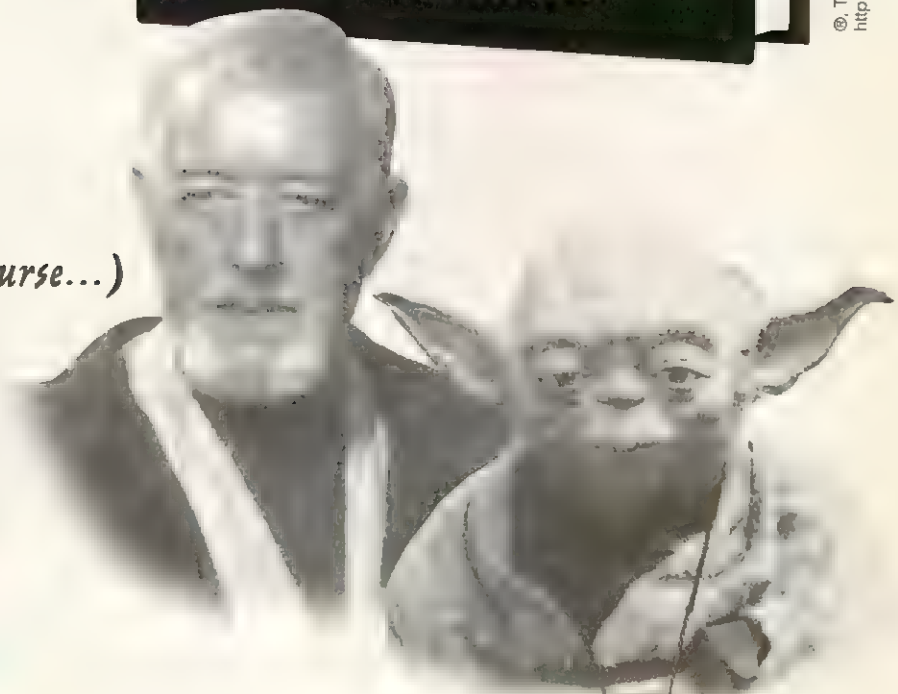
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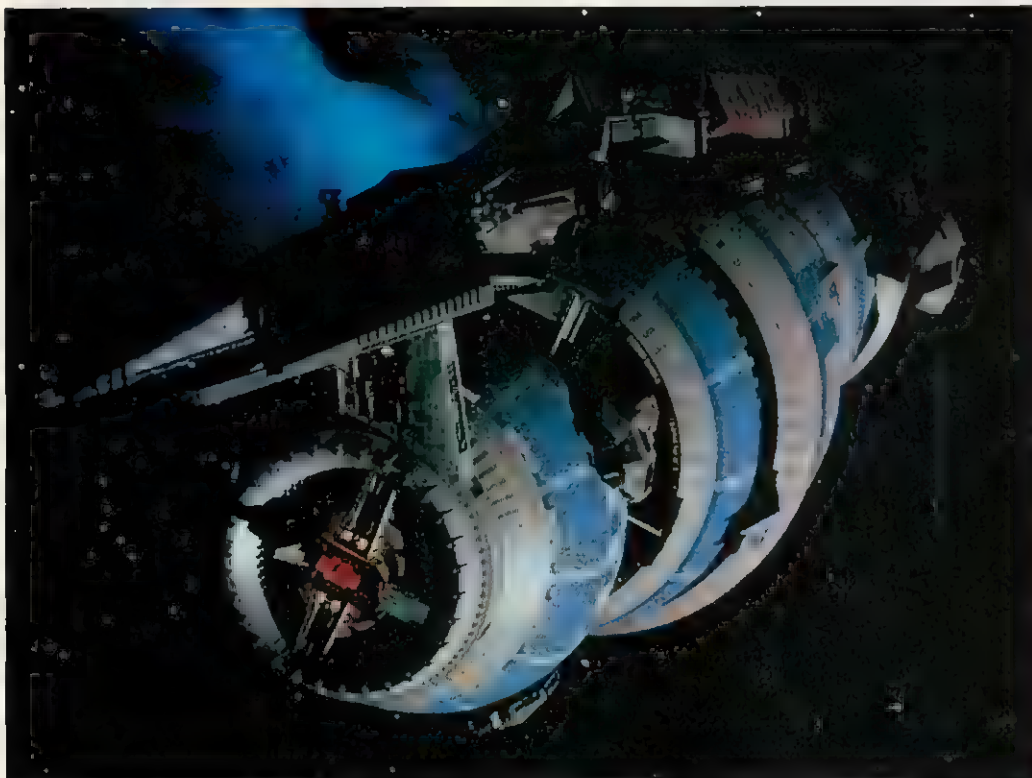
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SCIENCE

By Geoffrey A. Landis, Lawrence Krauss, and David Krieger

World-class scientists debate the science in Science Fiction.



ABOVE: *Babylon 5* is one of the few SF shows to follow proper scientific principles.

THE WORLD, IT SEEMS, HAS ENTERED THE SCIENCE fiction age. SF has stopped being the secret vice of the pocket-protector—wearing elite, and has splashed down into the mainstream. From popular television shows to mega-hit movies, even TV commercials have science fiction themes. Science fiction images and jargon surround us. But is it science?

Science Fiction Age sent its cyber-surfing scientist, Geoffrey A. Landis, into virtual reality to find the answers. On the Internet he caught up with two of the top gurus of the techno-trek set, Prof. Lawrence Krauss of Case Western University, and California extropian David Krieger.

Professor Krauss is an internationally known theoretical physicist whose professional work spans the universe, from exploring the nature of exploding stars to trying to answer the question of the origin of mass. His best-selling book, *The Physics of Star Trek* has sold over 200,000 copies in the United States, was serialized in *Wired*, and was the basis of a BBC TV production and an upcoming U.S. television production. His most recent book, *Beyond Star Trek*, appeared in November 1997 and is already under contract for five foreign editions. Dave Krieger served as scientific and technical adviser for the third and fourth seasons of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and now works on the cutting edge of the computer software industry.

If you want to search cyberspace yourself, an account of Krieger's experience with *Star Trek* can be found at

<http://www.fqa.com/dave/Waves.html>. Professor Krauss's research in astrophysics can be found at <http://theory2.phys.cwru.edu/krauss/krauss.html>. And our correspondent, SF writer Geoffrey A. Landis, can be found at <http://www.sff.net/people/Geoffrey.Landis/>.

LANDIS: Lawrence, what made you decide to write a book about the physics of *Star Trek*?

KRAUSS: The book began as a joke, in a sense. I was speaking to my editor about my next book, and we discussed this idea, because her daughter is a trekker. After thinking about it, the idea grew on me, and I couldn't get it out of my mind. *Star Trek* has captured the public's imagination. The Air and Space Museum in Washington DC had an exhibit of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, and it was the most popular exhibit in the entire history of the museum—far more popular than any spacecraft

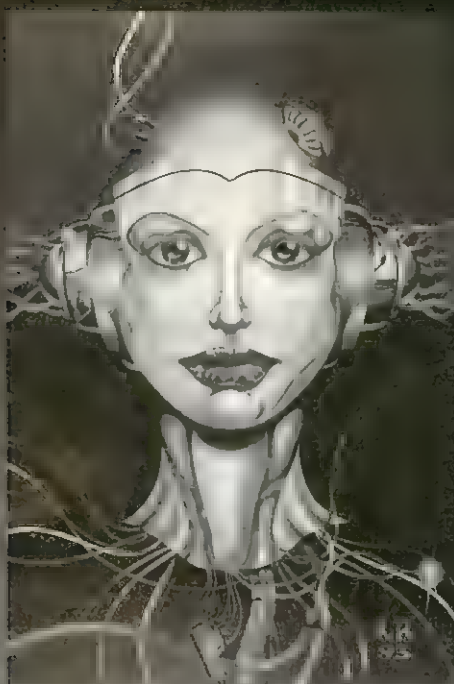
that had actually been in outer space!

KRIEGER: I get sad when I hear things like this. More popular than any spacecraft that had actually *been* in outer space?

KRAUSS: I used to shake my head regarding the Air and Space Museum experience, much as you do, but I think we have to work with that reality and try and do what we can, because for better or worse, that is the way it is. What better way to try and reach people than to use an icon of popular culture as one's basis? I recognized, as I pondered the issue, that there were diverse physical phenomena which are touched on in one way or another in the series. I decided that one of the reasons the series has been so popular for over 30 years is that it is about *possibilities*. Surely this is why most physicists do physics. They simply want to know what is possible in the universe. Thus the *Star Trek* setting as a laboratory in which to explore the physics of the real universe began to become more and more natural in my mind.

KRIEGER: Plus it makes a good sales hook! A horde of imitators have followed you with books on "the metaphysics of *Star Trek*," one called (I believe) *Human Minds, Alien Minds: The Psychology of Star Trek*, and two on "the biology of *Star Trek*."

KRAUSS: I suppose I should be flattered by the horde of imitators. One hopes that the net information flow which results is positive The bottom line is that people are interested in science fiction, whereas they don't



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QUOTES & NOTES

"The State had use for an empty man." - *Rammer*
 "Killer geeks riding timestreams, biting the heads off vast chickens of probability." - *Under Siege*
 "Rosa claimed to know where the Seven Cities of Gold were. Right." - *Cibola*
 "The crew can't strike against smugglers! This is an illegal operation." - *Hollywood Kremlin*
 "The churten would allow a crew to travel in its own time without time dilation." - *The Shobies' Story*
 "It's like a boardgame run by machines." - *Slow Birds*
 "A lot of people are on their own, infected with viruses that are virtually unique." - *Blood Sisters*
 "Don't fool yourself - this rescue mission was a political toy from the start" - *A Walk in the Sun*
 The planet Mercury was supposed to be boring, but investigative teams reported anomalies - *Cilia-of-Gold*
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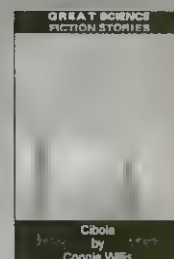
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perceive themselves as interested in physics. So, why not use one to motivate their learning the other? Moreover, since science fiction is full of errors, and having people confront their own misconceptions is one of the best ways to teach people and have them remember things, science fiction is a great teaching tool.

LANDIS: Is it possible to learn about real science from science fiction?

KRIEGER: It's certainly *possible* to learn about real science from science fiction, whether you define "real science" as "the process of how science is done," or as "real facts we have learned from science." But it's just as likely that what the reader learns from science fiction, even good science fiction, is pseudo-science or "rubber science" rather than real science. We have no theories at present that plausibly predict any kind of feasible "warp drive" or reactionless thrust but we still get plenty of interstellar empires in science fiction.

Of course there's plenty of SF that's simply space opera, that has nothing to do with science beyond borrowing (and misusing) its vocabulary. Televised SF is almost exclusively in this vein. Space opera can tell emotionally effective stories but it can dangerously mislead viewers about what to expect



ABOVE: Scientific accuracy was paramount in Kubrick and Clarke's 2001.

from the future, and from technology. Someone who reads or views science fiction but doesn't supplement it with any nonfiction science readings will know a lot of stuff that "ain't so." If, like me, you think science fiction is important because it informs our intuition about possible futures, then fiction that uses

"rubber science" is doing its readers (or viewers) a disservice.

KRAUSS: I agree ... which is one reason why I hope my book can help direct kids and others who are turned on to the pseudoscience they see on TV, and get them interested in the real stuff.

LANDIS: How was the book received?

KRAUSS: I had a fair amount of trepidation about it, because first I wondered what my colleagues would think, then I worried about the fans. But I had no cause for worry. I found out that the fans had been waiting a long time for an actual scientist to answer all their questions. My first fan letter said: "I have been waiting for 30 years to buy a *Star Trek* book in the science-fact section of a bookstore!"

KRIEGER: If I wrote a book on my *Star Trek* experiences it would definitely turn into a nit-picking diatribe. But the back-burner portion of my mind keeps storing away tidbits for *The Economics of Star Trek*, which would be even more of a diatribe, because there's so much to pick holes in, from the rationale for wanting to "rule the galaxy," to why they eventually *had* to bring money back into the *ST* universe.

LANDIS: Lawrence, you said science fiction is full of errors?

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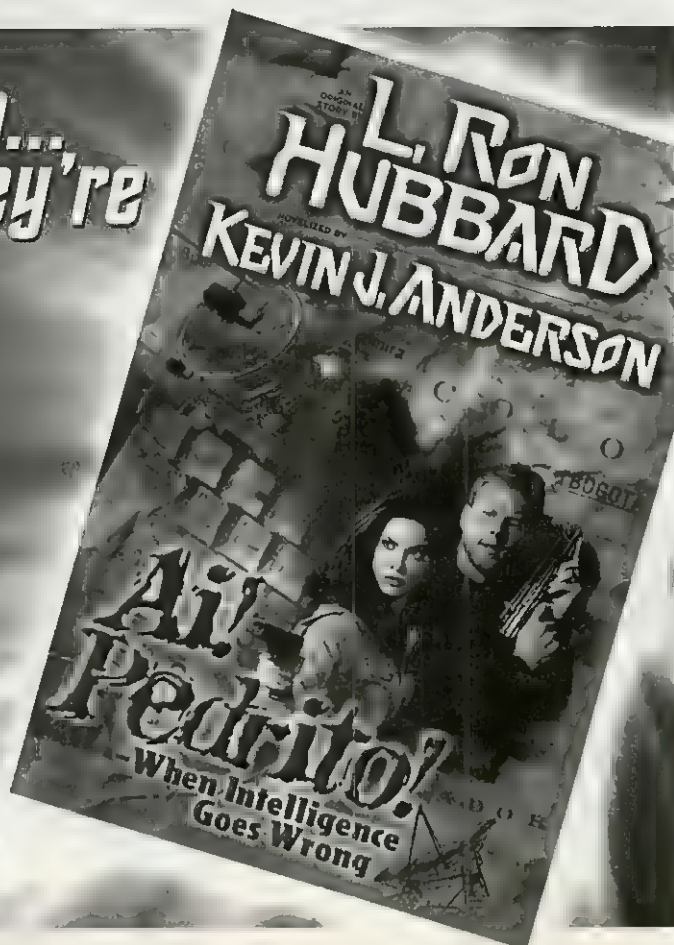
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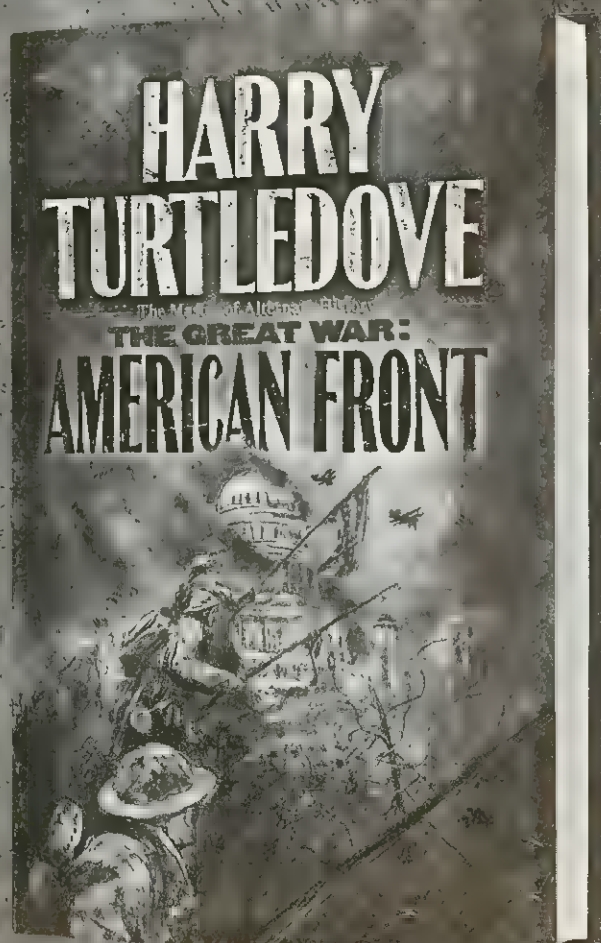
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KRAUSS: Well, almost everything. Sound in space. The ability to quickly "engage" your engines and travel very fast without getting squished like a bug on the back of the spacecraft. A mother ship one quarter of the mass of the Moon portrayed without bothering to think of the effect on the Earth. It is fun to look at these in the context of modern science, to differentiate between what is impossible, and what is merely impractical.

LANDIS: Does written SF tend to be more likely to get the science right?

KRAUSS: I think so, mainly because writers of "written" SF have a lot more time to think about things. The TV writers sometimes have a few hours to invent some technobabble, while the novelists can spend more time trying to make things consistent. But at the same time, I think that what drives SF in both mediums is the drama, and the science is really secondary, so that obvious liberties are taken, and I have no quarrel with that—except for the occasional really silly stuff.

KRIEGER: I'd agree with that unequivocally. Aside from individual episodes of anthology programs, like the modern incarnation of *The Outer Limits*, there are no examples of SF television that qualify as what I would call "Hard" SF. *Babylon 5* perhaps comes closest—the "Earth Force" spacecraft have rotating sections to provide centrifugal pseudo-gravity (though most alien species have "gravity control") and spacecraft thrust in the forward direction to brake rather than

merely cutting their engines and "coasting to a stop" like *Star Trek* ships.

As Lawrence rightly points out, the reasons for this are partly economic, and partly just laziness. It isn't really less easy to stay consistent if you just *keep it simple*.

When I was advising *Star Trek*, there were a number of instances where Geordi or Wesley (in fact, the *ST* writers) would pull a miraculous new device out of thin air in the last act to save the ship—but this new device was so insanely *useful* that some explanation would be required for why they didn't use it in every subsequent episode. For example, in one episode, the *Enterprise* crew dreamed up a "short-term memory eraser" in order to cope with a violation of the Prime Directive. (I don't need to explain the Prime Directive, do I?) The planetary native didn't remember her encounter with the *Enterprise*, so the Directive was honored. However, in a subsequent "first contact" episode, they then had to explain why they couldn't just use the same device again to solve their problem.

The expense of depicting free-fall scenes or *really* alien aliens (as opposed to guys with foam-rubber facial prostheses) is the other reason why TV SF so frequently ignores the rules.

What future directions can we expect for a democratic society in which the populace is more interested in someone else's fantasies than in reality?

LANDIS: Hmmm—sounds like a premise for an SF story!

KRAUSS: It would make a good story, but I don't think it would be SF. I think people have always been interested in other people's fantasies at least as much as they are interested in reality.

Having done a fair amount of TV, I agree that it is very difficult to get anything serious across on TV. Although, from experience in newspapers, I would say the same thing goes for that medium. I am not convinced that doing something deep is impossible, but it certainly is damn hard.

LANDIS: Dave said that we have no theories at present that plausibly predict any kind of feasible "warp drive." I don't know about that—

KRIEGER: I did weasel the words "plausibly" and "feasible" into that sentence—

LANDIS: It seems to me that recently we've been reading about things that are very similar to a "warp drive" in the pages of journals like *Physical Review* and *Classical and Quantum Gravity*.

KRIEGER: It's a great leap from the mathematical demonstration of something like a traversable wormhole to a profitable weekly freight schedule. There are already a good many laboratory phenomena that point to whole new realms of physics but don't immediately suggest any workable engineering applications. Sonoluminescence might be a good example.

KRAUSS: I think the interest in practical
Continued on page 94

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August 15
Oklahoma City, OK
Oklahoma State University

August 16
Montreal, Quebec
Canada
Caisse Populaire St-Esprit de
Rosemont's Reception Hall

August 16
Vancouver, BC
Canada
Renfrew Park
Community Complex

August 22
Boxborough, MA
Holiday Inn Boxborough
Woods

August 22
St. Anthony, MN
Coach's Corner Sports Cards

September 4
Loughborough, England
Euro Gen Con

September 5
North Chicago, IL
North Chicago City Building

September 19
Anchorage, AK
Shoei-Do's

September 19
Burlington, VT
Chamberlin School

September 19
St. Charles, MO
The Fantasy Shop

September 19
State College, PA
Pennsylvania State University

September 19
Toronto, ON
Canada
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
Bremen, Germany
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
Brisbane, Queensland
Australia
Location: TBA

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Brussels, Belgium
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Budapest, Hungary
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Frankfurt, Germany
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London, England
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Madrid, Spain
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Milan, Italy
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Munich, Germany
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Paris, France
Location: TBA

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Tokyo, Japan
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
Little Rock, AR
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
Mesa, AZ
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
Nashville, TN
Location: TBA

Date: TBA
New York, NY
Neutral Ground

Date: TBA
Redmond, OR
Diamond Sportscards

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Both The Tycoon
and The Scientist
thought the answers
were at hand.
The only problem was,
they were each
asking different
questions.

FIRST FIRE

By
TERRY
BISSON

"An unusual
request indeed.
Why should I fly
you to Iran?"

"Because you have
money and I don't,"
Emil wanted to say,
but didn't. "Because
I can help you
authenticate your
discovery at Ebta-
can," he said.

"What discovery?"

"The Flame of
Zoroaster."

The Tycoon nod-
ded his head. His
knee had been nod-
ding all along. He
was the richest man
in the world, and
clearly one of the
most impatient.

He wore Levis and a Gap T-shirt under a linen sport coat. His legs were crossed and his right foot was bobbing up and down as if he couldn't wait to get out of the office.

Emil had gotten this appointment only by pulling every string and calling in every marker. He knew he had less than 30 seconds to make his case.

"There is a legend that the fire at Ebtacan is the same one Darius worshipped," he said.

"I know the legend," said the Tycoon. The Ebtacan dig was one of the few of his many projects that he followed closely. Most of them he ran through one foundation or another, but his interest in archeology was genuine, and deep. Emil knew that he had visited and even worked at the dig several times.

"Archeology is not about legends," said the Tycoon. "It's about objects. Small, hard objects you find in the dirt."

"What if I told you fire was a hard object," said Emil.

The Tycoon narrowed his world-famous eyes. They were boyish only in photos. "I'm listening."

"I have developed a way to date fire. Not ashes, not charcoal, not the remnants or evidences of fire, but the flame itself."

"I'm all ears."

"Using my device, which I call the spectrachronograph, I can date a flame to its precise moment of ignition," said Emil. "With most fires that's only an hour or two. In the case of, say, the Olympic flame, it may be decades. I won't bother you with the technical details, but ..."

"Bother me with the technical details," said the Tycoon.

Emil explained how every flame has a unique spectragraphic signature, which is altered over time at a steady rate, and lost altogether when the flame is extinguished. "Every new flame has a new signature," he said. "With a spectrachronographic analysis I can date a flame's age to within fractions of a second per century."

"You've dated flames that old?"

"Not yet," said Emil. "Which is why I want to go to Ebtacan. Legends aside, the Flame of Zoroaster is likely to be hundreds of years old. Dating it will put my spectrachronograph on the map."

"And my dig as well," said the Tycoon.

Emil was startled to realize that he had scored. He went for the extra point.

"If we found a candle that had been burning since the French revolution, I could tell you exactly when the match itself was struck, within two seconds. I estimate my error factor at .8 seconds a century."

"I'll make it easy for you," the Tycoon said, opening his checkbook and writing as he spoke. "Come back to my office in one week. On my secretary's desk you will find a candle burning. I want you to tell me to within one second when the flame was lit. Pacific Standard Time."

He tore out the check and laid it on the desk to indicate that the interview was over.

Emil's heart was pounding as he picked up the check.

It was for a hundred dollars.

ONE WEEK LATER EMIL SHOWED UP AT THE Tycoon's office carrying what looked, to the secretary, like a water pistol.

"This is the one," she said, pointing to the candle burning on her desk.

Emil pointed his device at the flame and pulled the trigger until he heard a *beep*.

He released the trigger and read the display.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he said. "This flame was lighted less than three minutes ago."

"Sort of a joke," said the Tycoon, coming out of his inner office with a burning candle in his hand. With two fingers he pinched out the candle on the desk, then relighted it from the candle in his hand.

Emil pointed the spectrachronograph at the flame and pulled the trigger again until it beeped.

He read the display.

"I trust this is not another joke," he said. "This flame is almost 40

years old—39,864, to be exact. I can translate into months ..."

"That's okay," said the Tycoon. He sat down on the desk beside the burning candle, legs crossed, right foot bobbing. "That's very good. It was lighted from the Eternal Flame on JFK's grave at Arlington. Did you know it's illegal to carry an open flame on a commercial flight, even in first class? I had to send a chartered jet to DC for your little test, but you passed it with flying colors."

Emil thought of the chartered jet; he thought of his hundred dollars.

The Tycoon was already writing out another check. "This is for expenses and R&D," he said. "My secretary will send you a plane ticket. We will see you in Ebtacan in 10 days. But can I give you one piece of advice?"

The question was a courtesy only; the Tycoon didn't wait for an answer before continuing: "Don't call it a spectrachronograph. Too sci-fi. Just call it a time gun."

He stood up and handed Emil the check, then pinched out the flame again and left the room.

The check was for \$100,000.

EMIL HAD NEVER FLOWN FIRST CLASS BEFORE. For the first time he wished the Atlantic wider, the flight longer. The luxury ran out in Uzbekistan, however, and the last two legs were made on terrifying Aeroflot propjets.

Ebtacan was a tiny crossroads in a vast desert, scratches on mauve sand. Emil had expected magnificent ruins, and all he found were mud huts with corrugated roofs, a petrol station that calculated by abacus, and a stalled Russian tank covered with indecipherable graffiti.

"Alexander leveled it all," said the site manager, a portly Wisconsin professor named Elliot, as they drove from the dirt airstrip to the tent city at the dig. "The Macedonians razed the temples, raped the women, enslaved the men, butchered the children." He recounted this with an alarming glee. "Then Alexander personally snuffed out the sacred Flame of Zoroaster, which had burned, supposedly, for 10,000 years. But according to the legend, he was fooled. The flame had already been spirited away by the priests. It's preserved in a small shrine about 20 miles north of here."

Twenty miles in northern Iran was like two hundred back in California. The next morning, Emil found himself rattling across the black sands in a Toyota Land Cruiser expertly driven by a Wisconsin graduate assistant. Professor Elliot bounced around in the back seat.

"I've met him several times and he's all right with me," the graduate assistant said. "For one thing, he doesn't come on to every female. For another, he really cares about archeology. He has values."

Her name was Kay. She was talking about the Tycoon, a Wisconsin alumnus. Sometimes Emil got the impression that the purpose of his worldwide business and philanthropic activities was just so these conversations would be held.

"It's interesting that he is excavating this city that was sacked by Alexander," said Professor Elliot. "In many ways he is a modern Alexander. Nothing can stand against him, or at least against the technology, the capital, and the connections he commands."

The Flame of Zoroaster was in an artificial cave, carved out of a sandstone cliff. It was maintained and guarded by a small coterie of monks who were reluctant to show it to the nonfaithful. But Zoroastrianism is an obsolete and beleaguered faith, and it had been easy enough to convince local officials that the shrine was, like Ebtacan, part of the "Heritage of Humankind."

The monks were under orders. They had already let in the professor several weeks before. They did so again, graciously if reluctantly.

The flame burned in a large bowl of beaten gold. A young monk fed it twigs from a pile against one wall. The twigs themselves were testimony to the diligence and ingenuity of the monks, since the desert was barren for miles around. Emil found out later that the wood was brought by the faithful from as far away as India.

Emil pointed his "time gun" at the flame and pulled the trigger until it beeped. He looked at the display and let out a low whistle.

"What is it?" asked Professor Elliot.

"Just what they say," said Emil. He showed the professor and the student the display.

"Jesus!" said Kay.

"When this fire was built, Jesus was as far in their future as he is now in our past," said Emil.

The flame was 5,619.657 years old.

"So it's true," said Elliot, looking astonished.

Emil nodded. "Most of it. Certainly it's true that they've kept it burning since long before Alexander's time."

"Jesus," said Kay, again, shaking her head. Emil noticed that she was more attractive with her eyes wide and her lips parted. It softened her.

The monks looked pleased as they ushered their guests back out into the bright sunshine.

THAT NIGHT EMIL AND KAY SPENT THE NIGHT together, outside the tents, under the million stars. It was lonely on the dig, she explained, though she didn't really have to. She had a boyfriend, but he was in Madison. They had an understanding.

Emil suspected that she and the Tycoon had shared the same view of the desert sky. Somehow he didn't mind. It was a memorable evening. Kay was a memorable girl, small-breasted, high-spirited, compact, practical, and resourceful.

And Emil had never seen so many stars.

The next day he left for "the world," or at least New York. At the crude airstrip he was surprised to meet the Tycoon himself, helicoptering in. He was a little reluctant to talk about what he was doing, but Emil found out 11 months later, when he was invited to the unveiling of the Flame of Zoroaster at the Metropolitan.

The Tycoon was more than generous in his praise of Emil and his time gun, as he was careful to call it. And more than forthright in their short but substantial private discussion.

"I helped the government out with their debt, in exchange for the shrine. They made their own deal with the Zoroastrians. The shrine has always been a bit of an embarrassment to a fundamentalist government. Islam is a modern religion, you know. Post-Christian."

"You bought it," said Emil.

"It's an artifact," said the Tycoon. "Now that you have authenticated it, it belongs to all humankind."

At the Met the flame was fed on natural gas. Emil couldn't help wondering what had happened to the young monk who had fed it twigs. Was he a cabbie now, in Cairo or in Queens? As well wonder what happened to a soldier from Darius's army. Alexander's destiny was to conquer the world, not to number its sparrows.

Professor Elliot was at the opening, but not Kay. Emil was disappointed. He had entertained a fantasy of a rendezvous. He even mentioned her to the Tycoon, who said dreamily, "Kay? I have so many projects ..."

EMIL WAS APPARENTLY ON RETAINER, FOR once a year on the anniversary of his visit to Ebtacan he got a check for \$100,000. But never a call. That was all right; he preferred his independence. The Flame of Zoroaster had indeed put his time gun on the map, and in the next two years he authenticated (dated) the San Gabriel Mission hearth in California (221.052 years) and a coal seam blaze on Baffin Island (797.563 years).

The time gun was an accepted archeological tool, but after the first flurry of interest, there wasn't much demand. How many flames need dating? Emil tried to interest astronomers, but the device didn't seem to work at a distance. The numbers came out all wrong. According to the time gun, the stars weren't as old as the Earth.

Emil found out what had happened to Kay 18 months later, when

A TINY FLAME
BURNED IN A
HOLLOW IN THE
ROCK, WHICH
WAS FILLED WITH
OIL. THE WICK
SEEMED TO BE
TWISTED MOSS.

he got an e-mail suggesting a meeting at the Oak Room at the Plaza.

She wasn't alone. "This is Claude," she said, introducing a young black man in jeans and a raw silk jacket. Claude had a rich French accent, which was later localized to Kinshasa and Paris.

Emil didn't like him. His head was too big for his narrow shoulders. He smoked Galouises.

They ordered drinks. Kay let it be known that the Tycoon was picking up the tab. "I've been working for him since I got my doctorate," she said. "Special projects." Had he really not remembered her? Emil wondered. Did Alexander remember every city he ravished?

Claude was not a boyfriend. Not even, strictly speaking, a colleague, but a divinity student from Yale. "Comparative religions. And I have discovered," he said, "the oldest religion in the world. I think. As well as one of the smallest. It's called Ger'abté, which means in Highland Wolof, first fire."

"Remember the monks at Ebtacan?" said Kay, laying her hand on Emil's wrist. "This is the same deal. The entire purpose of the religion is guarding a fire."

"I remember," said Emil.

"Guarding a flame," said Claude. "I have interviewed one of the Ger'abté priests, a *defrocké*. A rebel, a runaway. I met him in Paris last year. He claims that the flame they call Ger'abté is the first flame ever lighted by man. It provides a *chemin sans brisé*, an unbroken link from the first humans to today. This flame is guarded and maintained by a secret priesthood high in the Ruwenzori."

"The Mountains of the Moon," said Kay.

"Overlooking the Rift Valley," mused Emil.

"Exactement," said Claude. "They have the location right. According to most anthropologists, this is the area where man first evolved."

"Whatever that means," said Emil. "Speech, upright posture, tools ..."

"Fire," said Claude. "Whatever else you think, fire is key. It separates man from beast."

"You believe them, then."

"Non, no, of course not." Claude lit another Galouise from his last. The cigarettes so far formed an unbroken chain, like the Flame of Zoroaster, or Ger'abté.

"But I do wish to find out how old the fire is," said Claude. "If it is, in fact, several thousand years old, it changes our whole view of so-called 'animist' African religions and their—how shall I say it?—their granités."

BEHIND THEM, IN
THE DARKNESS,
THE CHILDREN
WENT ABOUT
THEIR BUSINESS.
NOTHING IN THEIR
WORLD HAD
CHANGED. THEY
HAD KNOWN
ALL ALONG.

This man has a political agenda, thought Emil. But then who doesn't?

They made plans over dinner. Later, Emil found himself in a Plaza hotel suite with Kay. She was, if anything, even more inventive and accomplished than before. A memorable lover. Love without possession or even the desire for possession—that was what it meant to share a woman with the richest man in the world. It was as if the Tycoon lay alongside them. Oddly, it added to Emil's pleasure.

"You know what he did with the Flame of Zoroaster?" Kay asked.

"Sure. He bought it and put it in the Met."

"He put it out first."

"What!?"

"He's a strange and driven man," Kay said. "He feels this mystical connection with Alexander. He has this thing about history, about breaking with the past at the same time that you are recognizing it."

"But the whole damn point was that the flame was authentic! As soon as it's dated again ..."

"Why would it be? Unless you do it. And you are on his payroll. So to speak."

She held her small breasts, one in each hand, like pomagranates.

"Are you going to stay the night?"

THE RUWENZORI FROM THE AIR IS A terrifying tangle of cloud and ice and stone. Emil had discovered in his two years with the time gun that he was unsuited for serious field work. He didn't like small planes or short fields.

This trip had both.

Claude had been here once before. Kay and Emil hung back while he showed a letter and engaged a guide. The guide was not a Ger'abte initiate, but part of the secret and presumably ancient network of believers who maintained the priests who maintained the flame.

Kay arranged the transportation. They took a helicopter to a small

village on a high shoulder of the range; a Land Rover (they hadn't yet been replaced here by Toyotas) to a smaller village on a higher shoulder; and walked the rest of the way.

The Ruwenzori were wrapped in mist, like ghosts. The guide started up the trail, a long ribbon of mud.

Claude put out his cigarette before following.

"We could have choppered in the entire way," he said. "But that might have offended the l'enfants."

"The children?" Emil queried.

"Oui, the Children. That's what they call themselves," Claude explained. "It's an interesting contrast to European priests, don't you think, who style themselves as Fathers? These priests, there are only three at any one time, call themselves the Children of the First Fire, Ger'abte."

"Keeping alive the spirits of their ancestors," said Emil.

"Pas de tout!" Claude's reproach was sharp. "This is not simplistic ancestor worship d'afrique. They don't believe in gods or ghosts. Theirs is an anthropic cosmology: man built a fire, then looked up and saw the stars, thus bringing into being the universe as we know it. Their job is to keep it going."

"The ritual acknowledgement of fire as the source, the origin of consciousness," said Kay.

"Non! A task, not a ritual," said Claude. "Maintaining the first fire. Ger'abte. No more, no less."

What an arrogant fuck, thought Emil.

THE FIRST OF THE CHILDREN MET THEM late in the afternoon, and led them off the trail through a narrow pass. The guide turned back. Their new guide was a wiry, coal-black man of about 50, wearing a faded-blue hooded wool robe over bright Nikes. Single file, they crossed a snowfield, skirted a tiny emerald lake, and angled up a scree slope into clouds again.

As at Ebtacan, the shrine was a cave. The doorway was a perfect half-circle, hollowed not out of sandstone but from a polished granite that gleamed like marble.

Beside it waited a much older man, dressed in the same blue robe. He spoke to Claude in one language, and to his compatriot in another.

Claude gave each of the two a pack of Galouises. He hadn't smoked since the Land Rover. They were at almost 10,000 feet and the air was thin and cold.

The two Children led the three travelers into the cave. It was only 20 feet deep, the size of a small garage.

A Persian rug was on the floor. Several plastic 10 gallon drums were stacked near the door.

A tiny flame burned in a hollow in the rock, which was filled with oil. The wick seemed to be twisted moss.

An old man, older than the other two, watched the flame, adding oil from an open drum with a long dipper of bone or ivory.

Clever, thought Emil. The flame is kept small. They don't have to haul twigs up the mountain. Just oil.

He wondered if he had spoken out loud. The old man answered him, but not directly.

"He says that in the *temps perdu* it was done with twigs," said Claude. "Then they learned to use fat."

"Ask them how old the fire is," Emil said as he took out the time gun. The Children's slight alarm turned to curiosity as they realized it wasn't a weapon.

"They don't have an answer in years," said Claude. "They say *beaucoup*. Many many many."

"Ask them about the first men," said Kay.

"They were women," said Claude. "They call them the Mothers. They used no speech, but kept the fire. For many generations, no words, only fire. Many many many."

"*Habibis*," said Emil.

Continued on page 96

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THE WORLD HATED THEM.
AND THE WORLD NEEDED
THEM MORE THAN MANKIND
COULD EVER DREAM.

THE GUCKNO'S BOYS

BY ROBERT REED

I. Here's your first assignment:

Build a starship. And I want you to tell me all about it. Its name. How big it is. What it is made from. Tell me about its power plant and engines. How many are in the crew, and what are their names? They deserve names. Are they human, and if not, what? Draw them for me, and draw your ship, too. Do you have weapons on board? If so, what kinds? You might want to carry some little scout ships along for the ride. Anything else that you might think is useful, I'll let you take. Plus there's one piece

of gear that I'm putting on board. It's a box. A box about this big. Inside is a wormhole. Open its lid, and the wormhole swallows your ship, transporting it to somewhere else. You'll travel through space and through time. Or maybe you'll leave our universe entirely.

There's no way to know what happens next.

It's all up to me.

My name's Houston Cross. Call me Mr. Cross, or Houston. I'm going to be your science mentor for the year.

JOHNS WAS ONE OF THE FIRST PS'S BORN. He is 13 years old, and since he hasn't been skipped ahead in school, he's an eighth-grader. A growth spurt and a steady lack of exercise have made him larger than many adults. His kinky black hair is short. His coffee-colored skin has a boy's smoothness, still free of whiskers and hair on the forearms. His brown eyes are active, engaged. He smiles with a nervous eagerness, and sometimes, particularly when he's excited, he talks almost too quickly to be understood.

"Thanks for taking me," he blurts.

Then he adds, "Ms. Lindstrum says you've been doing this for a long time."

Ms. Lindstrum is the school's Gifted Facilitator.

"She says I'm lucky to have you."

Houston shrugs and halfway laughs. "I wouldn't know about that."

"How long have you been a mentor?" John asks, saying it in one breath, as if the sentence were a single word.

"Five years," Houston replies. "This is my sixth."

"Have you ever worked with us?"

"Eighth graders? Sure—"

"No. I mean us. Or do you teach normals, usually?"

Houston waits for a moment, then says, "I understood the first time." He shakes his head, telling the boy, "Please don't talk that way."

"Oh. Sorry!" John is instantly angry with himself. It shows in the eyes and how the big hands wrestle with one another. "You know what I mean. Normal gifted kids."

"Sure, John."

"I'm not better than anyone else," he blurts with a robust conviction. "I don't ever let myself think that way."

"Good."

"And I try to get along. With everyone."

"That's a good policy, John. Getting along."

The boy sighs, his face suddenly very young and tired. He looks around the empty classroom, then gazes out the long window. A wide green lawn ends at a quiet street, shade pooling beneath tall pin oaks.

"Can I start?" he asks.

"Excuse me?"

"With my starship. Can I, Mr. Cross?"

"Be my guest."

The Facilitator met with Houston yesterday. She warned him that John was an only child, and he lived with his divorced mother—a common circumstance among PS's. Perhaps that's why the boy suffered from feelings of guilt and loss and powerlessness. "But in the plus column," she added, "the mother is relatively well educated, and she seems to genuinely care about him. When she finds time."

John holds his stylus in his left hand, head bent forward, using an electronic workpad for the rest of their hour. He stops only to say that his hand is sore. When the bell rings—an obnoxious, metallic clanging—he looks up in panic, exclaiming, "But I'm not done yet!"

"Work at home tonight," Houston offers. "Or tomorrow. Here. We've got plenty of time, John."

The boy scrolls through page after page of sketches and hurried labels. Shaking his head in despair, he says, "This is all shit. I'm sorry about my language, Mr. Cross. But this is all just shit."

"We'll try again tomorrow."

But the boy isn't mollified. Folding his notebook, he says, "I get these ideas. All the time. But a lot of them ... well, they're just stupid. You know? They're *rancid* ...!"

The mentor smiles in a thin way.

He says, "John," and pats the boy's left hand.

He says, "Believe me. Everyone chews on that shit sandwich."

lions came from shrewd investments and several medi-technical advances in which he played a hands-on role. Following his 30th birthday, Phillip began pouring his wealth into a new research facility. To visitors and the press, he boasted that he would do nothing but cutting-edge research that would alleviate human misery. But close associates grew concerned with the real direction of their work, and to those malcontents, he said, "Here's six figures. Now quiet, or I'll have your nuts for lunch."

Too late, the CDC believed the warnings about the billionaire's plans.

Federal agents in bulky biosuits descended on Phillip's empire. But the criminal had already vanished, taking with him nearly 50 liters of growth media and an artificial microbe dubbed Phillip 23.

M

IKE WAS ONE of the last PS's born.

He has just skipped the sixth grade. No growth spurt has taken him, and judging by his wiry build, he's physically active. The face is narrower than John's, and two years younger, and something about it seems harder. He lives with parents of modest means. According to Ms. Lindstrum, the boy's genetics have little mutations. Which is normal among the last-born. "Maybe it's his genes," she warned Houston, "or maybe it's something else. Either way, Mike has a different attitude. You'll notice it right away."

"How'd you get this job?" the boy asks. Flat out.

"With bribes," Houston replies. Instantly.

"No," says Mike, never blinking. "I bet they gave you some special tests."

Houston laughs, admitting, "They asked a lot of questions. But I don't know if I'd call it a test."

"When did this happen?"

"When I started working in the schools."

"How long have you been a teacher?"

"A mentor."

"Yeah. That." Mike has long hair—longer than any current fashion—and either through pharmaceutical tricks or the mutations, it's straighter and edging toward blond. The boy spends a lot of time pushing unruly locks out of his brown eyes. "You've been a mentor for a long time. Haven't you?"

"Several years now."

"But you didn't deal with *us* til now." He says it, then smiles with a slyness, happy to prove his special knowledge. "I've been asking about you."

"You have been."

"Shouldn't I have?"

Houston waits for a moment, then asks, "Did you talk to John about me?"

"God, no. Not that idiot."

Houston says nothing.

"No, there's some guys you used to teach. To mentor. Whatever." Mike names them—both boys are in high school now—then adds, "They thought you were pretty good. All things considered."

"All things considered, that's good news."

"They told me that you steered clear of *us*."

Houston doesn't respond.

"Why is that?"

"You weren't old enough." He speaks calmly, without doubts. "I like working with middle-schoolers. Not children."

The comment makes an impact. The boy almost smiles, then remembers his next question. "What did they ask?"

"When?"

"When you became a mentor. What kinds of questions did you get?"

"The interviewer wondered what I knew about gifted students. He asked what I would do in this situation, or that one. And he checked to see if I'd ever been arrested—"

"Have you been?"

PHILLIP STEVENS WAS THE ONLY CHILD OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN man and his German-American girlfriend. Phillip was labeled gifted before he was eight. He graduated from Princeton at 18, then dropped out of medical school two years later in order to form his own corporation. His first billion dollars were made before he was 26, most of it coming from the rapidly growing genetics industry. His later bil-

"Five times," he says. Then he asks, "Do you believe that?"
"No," the boy snorts. Then, "What about this year? Did they make you do anything special before you got us?"

"Some things," Houston admits. "I had to read various books and some very boring reports. And I went through special in-depth training for an entire afternoon. I needed to be sensitized to your circumstances and special needs."

"Oh, yeah? I've got special needs?"

"Everyone does, Mike."

"What else?"

"I signed a contract. I'm never supposed to talk to the press. Ever." Houston's voice sharpens, just for that instant. Then he smiles, adding, "All questions are handled through the Special Task Office at district headquarters."

Mike seems impressed with the answers or the precautions. Or perhaps both.

Houston prods him. "Work on your starship. Okay?"

Instead of a workpad, Mike has a fat spiral notebook and a pen leaking an unearthly green ink. With his left hand, he writes Day One on the first page. A moment's reflection leads to a little laugh, then a sly glimpse at his mentor. "Hey, Houston," he says. "Can I have an antimatter cannon?"

"I don't know. What is an 'antimatter cannon'?"

The boy rolls his brown eyes. "It's a cannon. It shoots balls of antimatter. They explode into pure energy when they hit *anything*."

"Okay. But how would a weapon like that work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is your ship built from antimatter?" Houston asks. "And the crew, too?"

"That would be stupid," the boy assures him. "The first time we landed on another planet—boom."

"But how do you keep your shells from destroying you?" Houston asks the question, then leans closer. "How do you manipulate something that you can't touch?"

The boy thinks hard for a moment, then says, "Magnets."

"Okay."

"We make cannonballs out of anti-iron," he says, "and we keep them in a vacuum, held there by a really powerful magnetic field."

"Good enough," says Houston.

Mike shakes his head, admitting, "Those guys I know ... they warned me. You can really be un-fun when you want to be."

Houston says, "Good."

The boy folds himself over his notebook, working with the same fevered intensity that John showed. But he doesn't complain about a sore hand, and while the sketches are sloppier than those on a workpad, he seems infinitely more pleased with the results.

After the bell rings, Houston admits, "I'm curious. What do you want to do with that fancy cannon?"

"Blow up planets," the boy says. Instantly. Then he looks up, wearing a devilish grin.

"Is that okay with you, Houston?"

"Sure," he says. "Why not?"

THE SYNTHETIC PROTOZOAN, Phillip 23, was a mild but durable pathogen carried by spit and the air. Healthy males and children rarely showed symptoms. The old and impaired developed flu-like infections, and at least a thousand died during the epidemic. But fertile women were the preferred hosts. The bug would invade the monthly egg, consume the mother's nucleus and mitochondria, then replace both with huge amounts of nuclear material.

All races and all parts of the globe were struck by the disease.

Victims included nuns and teenage virgins and at least one lady on death row.

During the epidemic, some 3 percent of all conceptions on the planet were baby boys carrying Phillip Stevens' genetic code.

YOUR THIRD MENTEE," Ms. Lindstrum began to say. Then she hesitated, contemplating her next words.

They were sitting in the woman's tiny office.

"The boy's name is Troy Andrew Holdenmeister. And I should warn you. His parents are utterly devoted to him."

Houston said, "Okay."

The Facilitator was scrolling through reports and memos and test results of every complexion. With a mixture of professional distance and practiced scorn, she said, "The mother has dedicated her life to the boy. She has three other children, but it's Troy who gets most of her attentions."

"I see."

"She wants to meet with you. Tomorrow, if possible."

Houston said nothing.

"And there's something else you should know: Troy isn't quite like the other PS's. His scores are lower in the usual peak areas. Math and science, and so on."

"Mutations?" Houston asked.

She shrugged, as if to say, "We can hope." But she had to admit, "He's only five months younger than John. Mutations were rare then. And the differences ... well, it isn't likely that a few genes would change so much ..."

Ms. Lindstrum looked like someone who had been married once or twice, and always too soon. She was tall and a little heavy around the hips, and beneath a professional veneer was a puddle of doubts and fickle emotions. Houston recognized the symptoms. They showed in the lonely eyes and the way she always would watch his eyes. He sensed that if he wanted, he could gently take hold of one of her hands, say the usual nice words, and have her. Within the week, Ms. Lindstrum would be making breakfast for him, wearing nothing but her best apron, smiling in a giddy, lovesick way.

Houston didn't reach for her hand.

"Is Troy adopted?" he asked.

Ms. Lindstrum shook her head. "I know someone who knows the family. Mrs. Holdenmeister was most definitely pregnant."

A Newly Standardized IQ score lay in plain sight. Houston underlined the number with his thumb, remarking, "There could have been some simple prenatal problem."

"Maybe," she agreed.

But probably not, thought Houston.

Then quietly and a little sadly, Ms. Lindstrum admitted, "It's a respectably average IQ. Enough to make any parent happy ... if she didn't know any better ..."

A 13-year-old boy sits hunched over a large, expensive workpad, focusing all of his attentions on his starship.

"He loves this kind of project," says his mother. She sits at the front of the classroom, and without a gram of subtlety, she stares at her son's mentor. "I'm relieved that you agreed to meet with me. Our last mentor didn't want to."

The woman is small and delicate as a carpet tack, with fierce little blue eyes that hint at a scorching temper.

Houston doesn't say what first comes to mind.

Instead, he tells her, "I want a good relationship with every parent."

"Do you have the other boys, too?" she wants to know.

He nods. "John and Mike. Yes."

"Try, if you can, to keep Mike away from my Troy." She says what she thinks, then thinks about how it sounds. To soften the moment, she adds, "John's very nice. We like him quite a bit. But the other one... he scares us, frankly ..."

Houston says nothing.

He refuses to look at the woman. Instead, he stares into the blackness of the on-line screen. It covers the back wall. The teacher who uses this classroom in the morning has turned it off, which is standard policy. He makes a mental note to ask for the screen to be left

ready to work, in case they need help.

Perhaps sensing his mood, Mrs. Holdenmeister makes eye contact and tries a hard little smile. "If you need it, I can arrange for special software. And lab equipment. Anything of that sort."

"Not for now," he says. "Thank you."

"Because I'm perfectly willing—"

Houston interrupts, explaining, "What I usually do is give my students thought problems. They have to work out what's happening, and why, and what they can do about it."

"I see," she says, without conviction.

"And sometimes I'll make them face ethical dilemmas, too. What's right, what's wrong. And in the absence of either, what's best."

She opens her mouth, then hesitates.

After a long pause, she asks, "Would it be all right if I watch you at work again? With my husband. Name the day, and he'll take the afternoon off from work ... if that wouldn't be too much trouble—"

"I don't believe so." He says it calmly, with a flat unaffected voice.

"Excuse me?"

"I wouldn't be comfortable," he explains. "An audience isn't going to help me with what I'm doing here."

She doesn't know what to say. Sitting motionless, Mrs. Holdenmeister breathes rapidly, trying to imagine a new, more productive avenue.

She decides on pity.

"You know," she whispers, "it's been very difficult just getting him into the mentoring program. That Facilitator has fought us all the way."

"Well," Houston replies, "I agree with you on this one."

That wins a smile, cold but bright. Then she abruptly turns her head, saying, "Darling," with a big, overdone voice. "Do you have something for us?"

"Mr. Cross?" says the boy. He's nearly as old as John, but smaller. Not just thinner, but he hasn't found his growth spurt yet. Whatever the reason, he's little larger than the 11-year-old Mike. Where the other boys have quick eyes, Troy's are simpler and slower. And while he has their voice, the words come out at their own studied pace.

"How is this, Mr. Cross?"

His mother snatches the workpad, then says, "Darling. It's wonderful!"

Houston waits.

"Isn't it just spectacular, Mr. Cross?" She hands the pad to him, then tells her son, "Great job! It's just wonderful!"

The boy and his software have drawn a starship with precise lines and in three dimensions. There are intricate details, and on the next pages, elaborate plans for the bridge and the engines. It's very thorough work, and that's all it is.

Quietly, without inflection, Houston says, "Troy." He asks, "Have you seen the movie *Starfarer*?"

some candy-colored. Plus there are two blood-red swirls. And the disk itself is flattened on top and below, and it bulges out around its waist.

That's what you can see, and what else can you tell me?

"IS IT JUPITER?" John asks.

"How do you know it's a planet?"

"Can I see stars?"

"Yes."

"The stripes are clouds. The swirls are hurricanes."

"All right. It's a planet," Houston concedes.

"Is it Jupiter?"

"Two red swirls," Houston repeats.

"Yeah, but that wormhole can take us through time. So it could be Jupiter. But millions of years ago."

"Good point. But it's not."

The boy nods compliantly, then grins. "Tau Ceti 5."

"Excuse me?"

"It's a planet. Haven't you heard about it?" Sensing an advantage, John explains, "They've found thousands of planets that look like Jupiter. The big telescopes spot new ones every day."

"They do," Houston agrees. "This isn't one of them."

"No?" The boy licks his lips, puzzled. "What about its sun?"

"Good question." The mentor pauses, considering his possibilities. "Two suns," he offers. "Close enough to touch each other."

"Can that happen?"

"Sometimes. But it's temporary. They'll lose momentum and fall together, then merge into one sun."

"Delicious!" he exclaims. Then, "What else can I see?"

"Moons. With your naked eyes, you count five of them."

"Big ones?"

"I don't know. How do we find out?"

John shrugs and says, "With sensors. I'll ask my sensors."

"What kinds of sensors?"

"Sensors." The boy believes in that word, and why can't Mr. Cross?

"But how do they work?" Houston asks. Then he warns him, "Not by magic, they don't. Every machine has its job and its inherent logic."

John grunts and says, "I don't know. They just work."

Houston shakes his head.

The boy compresses his mouth to a point, staring at his elaborate starship. It looks like a crystal chandelier with rockets stuck in its stem. "I don't get it," he finally confesses. "I thought we were going to explore the universe."

"So we'll start with good old universal principles," Houston tells him. "About light and energy and mass, for instance. Then later, if you really want, we can move on to those boring old moons."

"I signed a contract. I'm never supposed to talk to the press. Ever."

"About a thousand times," the boy confesses.

"Because that's where this ship came from," Houston warns him.

"You've done an exceptional job of copying it."

The brown eyes blink. Confused, suspicious.

But Mom hears an entirely different message.

"Good for you!" she sings out. "Good, good, good for you!"

2. YOUR STARSHIP EMERGES FROM THE WORMHOLE.

The first thing you see is a disk. The disk has stripes. Some dark,

THE PS EPIDEMIC LASTED 30 MONTHS. OCCASIONALLY THE clones shared the womb with unrelated embryos. Sometimes they arrived as identical twins or triplets. But most were single babies, active and free of complications. In modern nations, a relatively simple test allowed expectant mothers to learn if their son was a clone. Many chose chemical or clinical abortions. And there was a deluge of orphaned babies that ended up with more forgiving or more desperate couples.

In certain backward nations, solutions wore harsher faces.

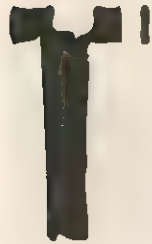
There were even places that pretended to escape the PS plague. Despite the global nature of this illness, despots and their xenophobic citizens denied ever seeing the clones, and they denied every rumor about organized infanticide. And even if babies were dying by the thousands, who could blame them?

A man and woman struggle to raise their own child. Why should they be forced to raise an abomination, too?

Which was what those babies were.

Abominations.

An opinion officially ridiculed by wealthy nations. Even while opinion polls found that a quarter to a third of their own people believed exactly that.



he first thing I do is shoot it."

"Shoot the planet?"

"Are you going to let me?" Mike asks.

"Who am I? Part of your crew?" Houston lifts his hands, saying, "Wait. You haven't told me anything about the people on board."

"They aren't human."

"Okay."

"They're robots. Ten feet tall and built of smart metals."

Houston nods, then asks, "Do those robots have a leader?"

"Sure."

"What's his name?"

Mike dips his head, staring at his green-ink-and-paper starship. It's a bullet-shaped contraption bristling with every possible weapon.

"You'll want a good strong name," says Houston.

"Damned right!"

"How about Crocus?" he suggests.

"I like that! Crocus!" Mike nods and pushes at his hair, then asks, "Can Crocus fire his antimatter cannon?"

"Be my guest."

"All right. He lets loose a planet-busting round. Then, What happens?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it takes time for the round to reach its target."

Mike shakes his head, and with a disapproving tone says, "John warned me about this game of yours."

"You talked to John?"

"In the hallway. For just a second."

"I thought you didn't like him."

"I don't. He's a fat twisted goof." Then the boy shrugs, adding, "But he always talks to me. I can't stop him."

Houston watches the narrow face, the narrowed eyes. Then, "How fast is your cannon ball moving?"

"Fast."

"Make a guess."

"Half-light speed. How's that?"

"If it takes 20 seconds for the antimatter to reach the planet—"

"It's 10 light seconds away." The boy dismisses the entire game, saying, "This is easy. That big planet is ... let me think ..." He does some quick calculations on paper. "Twenty million miles away. No, wait ...! Two million miles. Right?"

"Something like that."

Mike nods, happily in control. "So then. How big's the explosion?"

"Good-sized."

"Damn right!"

Houston shakes his head, saying, "The shell's moving half the velocity of light, which means it has a terrific momentum. It burrows into the atmosphere and turns to plasma and light, and the explosion comes squirting back up through the vacuum left behind it. Like out of another cannon, sort of."

"And the planet explodes—!"

"Hardly," Houston warns. "It's not nearly the explosion you want."

"That's stupid," Mike tells him.

"No," says Houston. "It's not."

The boy stares at his starship, confusion and betrayal on his face. And then a sudden little smile comes to the eyes and mouth, and he exclaims, "I get it. That world's antimatter, too. Isn't it?"

"What if it is?"

"Jesus," he says, with mock panic. Then he slams his notebook shut and says, "We've got to get the hell out of here!"

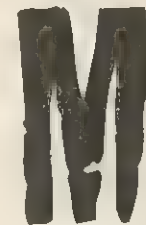
WORLDWIDE, BIRTH RATES DROPPED FOR BETTER THAN FIVE YEARS.

Couples delayed having children. Millions of women underwent hysterectomies, so great was their fear of conceiving a PS. The epidemic's climax was marked with incompetent news coverage sparking wild rumors. The most persistent rumor was that Phillip Stevens' genes were found inside every newborn, regardless of sex or race. And what made the rumor all the more pernicious was that it was true, in a sense: Humans were a young species. Eskimos and Pigmies shared vast amounts of genetic information. But that abstraction didn't translate well at work and home, and millions of healthy, non-PS offspring were aborted during the panic.

Even when a vaccine was available, people remained suspicious.

What if it didn't work as promised?

Or worse, what if this was just the first plague? What if a hundred mad bastards were putting together their own bugs, and this mess was really just beginning?



Maybe that planet has life," says Troy.

"Maybe so. How would you find out?"

The boy says, "I'll go there." Then he thinks to ask, "May I?"

"By all means."

Houston describes the two-million-mile voyage, and later, as the Hollywood-built starship slips into the atmosphere, Houston asks, "Who's in command?"

"The captain." Troy and his software have drawn a dozen people wearing trim blue uniforms. Everyone resembles a famous actor or actress. The captain is the tallest, oldest man, sporting a short dark beard.

"What's his name?"

"Storm. Captain Storm."

"Is he a human, or a robot?"

"Oh, he has to be human."

"Is he a good man?"

"Always." The boy looks at Houston with an imploring expression. "He wouldn't be the captain if he wasn't."

"Fair enough." Houston nods, smiles. Then he scratches his little beard, saying, "Your ship flies into a cloud and pulls in a sample."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. At room temperature and pressure, it's liquid."

"Like water?"

"Exactly."

"Maybe there's life in it."

"How would you test that?" Houston asks.

The boy inhales, then holds his breath. Thinking.

"Any ideas?"

He exhales, confessing, "I know I'm not supposed to use sensors."

"Did John tell you?"

Troy shakes his head, then catches himself.

"Don't worry," Houston purrs. "You can talk to Mike. I don't care."

All the same, the boy seems ashamed.

Then Houston prods him, saying, "A microscope is a kind of sensor. And I'll let you use any sensor if you understand how it works."

"I do," says Troy. "I've got two microscopes at home."

"Okay. Use one of them now."

The hands assemble an imaginary slide, then the right eye squints into an imaginary eyepiece.

Watching, Houston quietly asks, "What is life?"

Then, in more concrete terms, he asks, "How do you recognize it?"

"Life is busy," the boy tells him, his voice pragmatic and pleased.

"When I make a slide at home, what I look for are things that are really, really busy."

3. *YOU SET DOWN ON A DESOLATE WORLD. A HARD WHITE PLAIN stretches to the horizon. There's no trace of people or cities or even simple life forms. But perhaps something once lived here, and that's why you're putting on your archaeology hat.*

I want you to dig into a piece of ground.

Like a scientist, you need to keep track of everything that you find. Everything. I want you to leave future generations with enough information to resurrect this dig site. Keep notes. Always. Make drawings and maps. And try to figure out what happened here.

There's a story waiting. If you can find it.

HOUSTON HAS A SMALL one-bedroom apartment that's a short drive from school. It's clean, but rarely tidy. He has lived here for a little more than five years. Prints of famous abstracts hang above the second-hand furniture. On a shelf fixed to one white wall are a pair of trophies. "Mentor of the Year," the plaques read. "Houston Cross." Both trophies show a pair of brass hands clasping—one hand large and grandfatherly, while the other is quite small and only half-formed.

He is working in the tiny kitchen.

Big old roasting pans are set in a row on the countertop. Inside each pan are pieces of shattered robots and random wires and the carefully dismantled bodies of several plastic toys. Houston bought three skeletal monsters, each with a human-like skull and six arms rooted into a long back. He has cut them apart and thrown out the occasional piece—fossils are almost never whole—and after setting everything into a careful heap, he pours a fresh polymer-plaster into the pans, trying not to spill, and when he does, immediately cleaning up the dribbles and drops.

"Breaking news," says the television. It's an old high-density, but Houston built its AI from a kit, then trained it to find what interests him.

He glances up and says, "Show me."

"—furthermore, the study shows that once a minimally enriched environment is achieved, the boys' intellectual development plateaus—"

The pictured face could be John's. It's older than most PS's, and pudgy.

"Save it," says Houston. "I'll watch it later."

"Okay," says the machine.

He sets the three pans inside the oven, the low heat helping the plaster cure. Then he heats up last night's leftovers in the microwave and, sitting in front of the television, prepares to watch the news story.

"Breaking news," says his television.

"Show me."

"—the controversial book is the fifth most popular title in the world today. *The Cuckoo's Boys* has sold more than 20 million copies, and that despite being banned in much of Europe and Brazil."

The author appears. Beneath him floats a name. Dr. Paul Kaan. An ex-associate of Phillip Stevens, Kaan has a gentle face and hard, uncompromising eyes. Talking to an unseen audience, he explains, "I wrote this book because it's vital that people understand. What the PS's represent is nothing short of a debasing of our species and a debacle for our immortal souls!"

Houston watches the three-minute report.

Afterward, the screen returns to a mountain vista accompanied by a quiet dose of Grieg. More minutes pass. The oven timer goes off. Finally, almost grudgingly, Houston rises and pulls the pans out of the oven. Then he sits again, watching his dinner grow cold, and the AI asks, "Should I run the synopsis?"

"Excuse me?"

"About the intellectual development of the PS clones. Are you still interested?"

"Not really. No."



THE CURVED TIP of the butterknife bites into the plaster, and the blade itself starts to bow as John presses, working to expose a length of yellow-brown plastic bone. He's been working quickly, almost frantically, for most of the hour, taking notes only when coaxed. After two months together, Houston feels sure that the boy should be enjoying himself. But something is wrong. Is distracting him. It isn't much of a guess when Houston asks, "What's going on at home?"

"Nothing," John blurts.

"Okay."

"Nothing," he says again. Then as if caught in the lie, he adds, "Well, yeah. I got in a fight last night."

"With your mom?"

"No. Her boyfriend." He shakes his head, then shoves hard with the knife, the entire bone popping out of its hole.

"Notes," Houston urges.

"I know. I know." Abbreviated, useless observations are jotted down. Then everything comes to a halt. John drops the knife and says, "My wrist hurts. Really bad." Then he stares out the window, a dumbfounded rage in the eyes and the hard-set mouth.

After a long moment, Houston asks, "What happened last night, John?"

"I'm not *him*."

Houston waits.

"That boyfriend of hers ... he always calls me Phillip." The boy deepens his voice, saying, "Phillip, bring me this. Philip, you're in my way. Phillip, get the hell lost."

"But you're not Phillip Stevens."

John looks at his feet now. Shaking his head.

"You're just the man's genetics."

"I told him that."

Houston says, "Good."

"PS was a different person than me. Right?"

"Absolutely."

"I mean, he was born in a different century, and in another place. Everything about his life was different than mine. Right?"

"Did you tell him that?"

"Yeah. But all he did ... he just laughed at me. He said, 'That's just what old Phillip would say, if he was here.'"

Houston says nothing.

"Fucker," says the boy. Viciously, with a pure scalding hatred.

Then with a low, stern voice, his mentor suggests, "You shouldn't, maybe. I know you don't like your mother's friend, but calling him that name—"

"No, Mr. Cross," John interrupts. "I'm talking about the other fucker."

FOR FOUR YEARS, LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES FOLLOWED EVERY wrong lead, interviewed millions of earnest, mistaken individuals, and through means legal and otherwise, they pulled up the bank and tax records of more than a billion suspects.

But in the end, a routine traffic accident gave them Phillip Stevens.

An unidentified man driving a dilapidated pickup truck happened to rear-end a young mother. Bumpers locked. When two uniformed officers arrived, the man was staring at a PS child riding in the back seat. Suddenly he panicked, pulling a weapon and discharging it into the air. Witnesses saw him fleeing into a nearby warehouse. There was a second muted shot. Eventually, a SWAT team broke into the warehouse and discovered a body lying in a tiny men's room, the scene filthy with blood and bone and bits of drying brain matter.

Subsequent tests proved that the corpse belonged to the missing billionaire. His face and skin color had been altered by surgical means, but his famous DNA was instantly recognized by five reputable labs, including his own.

The young mother was labeled a hero, then lost the label when she

refused 10 million dollars for her role in ending the manhunt. Furthermore, she enraged many by admitting that she only wished she had known who the man was ... she wanted to thank Phillip for giving her her wonderful son ...!

Vouth is a blessing.

When Mike takes the knife to the plaster, he believes. He is *eleven*, and this is fun, and he's enthralled. Intent, absolutely focused, each slice into the whiteness is full of possibilities.

Like John and every other young boy, PS or not, scientific ritual distracts him from his fun. Notes are taken, but only under duress. Working with ink on paper, Mike jots and sketches. Then he picks up the knife with both hands, making a game of picking his next quadrant, and after a calming breath, he cuts chisels a deep wedge of plaster.

Houston can't remember where he put which artifact, and so it's nearly a surprise to him when the boy uncovers a single golden eye gazing up at the alien sky.

Mike says, "Shit."

He giggles and says, "Neat," and goes to work with an old toothbrush, using bristles bent against Houston's teeth, sweeping away the clinging dust.

Half of the period is invested exhuming the skull. It's small and obviously plastic, yet something about it intrigues the boy. He can't stop smiling afterwards moving to the next quadrant and working his way down to a severed hand clinging to a toy weapon. With a dissecting needle, he shoves at the trigger. A weak light and muted whine come from beneath the hardened plaster.

Houston waits.

The boy looks up, grinning.

"Wal-Mart?" he says matter-of-factly.

Disappointed, Houston shrugs and says, "Maybe."

But the boy's attitude shifts. With his next breath, he's back on that other world, and with a bleak authority, he says, "This is some ass-kicking monster. So something really tough must have killed it. That's what I think!"

AFTER THE BELL RINGS, THE HALLWAY JAMS WITH STUDENTS.

Houston's habit is to walk each boy to the door, then stand there and watch the kids pass by. The sixth-graders are still very much children; while the eighth-graders, and particularly the girls, are metamorphosing into their adult selves. By the end of the year, Houston will catch himself watching the young women. When he first began mentoring, a certain kind of girl might offer glances and winsome smiles. But five-plus years is a long time, and his wilting hair and the graying beard makes him look older than their fathers. Houston has, in effect, vanished from their hormonal radar.

Mike's locker is straight across the hall.

Still grinning about the buried skull, he fingers his lock, and when it doesn't recognize him, he slams it hard against the gray steel, then tries again.

Troy steps up behind him, saying something.

The two boys talk for a moment. Differences in age and Mike's bleached hair make them look like siblings, not twins. And it helps that Troy carries himself with a slump-shouldered shyness, while his younger brother is the cockier, self-assured one.

Houston tries to read lips. And faces. And postures.

Then he notices other students. Like him, some stare. One boy points, which triggers a second to follow his lead. Then a tall girl giggles and shouts, "Which one's real? Which one's real?"

Mike calmly flips the girl off.

Troy just dips his head, trying to ignore the taunt.

Then as Houston starts to say something to the girl—acidic and cutting and cold—she turns and skips past him, still giggling, a bony elbow clipping his elbow as she passes, never noticing him.

IN THE END, Troy is the only boy to reassemble the entire skeleton. What's more, he uses resins and a bottomless patience to sculpt bones to replace what's missing. When the others have gone on new missions, he continues to happily piece together and repair. In the end, both a tiny toy robot and the skeleton man look like museum displays, mounted on a new plaster landscape that he and his mother built on a rainy Saturday.

Houston hangs a dozen concepts on those toys.

Entropy. Evolution. Anatomy.

"Those extra arms wouldn't work," he explains. "No shoulders, so there's no place to anchor the muscles. Is there?"

The boy shrugs. "I guess not."

"Why would a six-armed man evolve?"

With an enduring patience, he says, "I guess he must have needed them."

"The universe tends to slide from order into disorder. Have you ever heard that before, Troy?"

"When Mom cleans my room." When he laughs, he sounds most like John. Like Mike. Like many hundreds of thousands of boys. But the grim, abstract heart of this entropy business remains out of reach. He shrugs again, and with an easygoing stubbornness, he confesses, "I don't think about that stuff much."

Trying to cushion the bad news, he shrugs and smiles, admitting, "I'm not like them, Mr. Cross. Sorry."

THE BOOKSTORE STILL ACCEPTS CASH.

What's more, it's large enough to keep a ready inventory of best-sellers. No need to wait around three minutes while your purchase is printed and bound. Houston can pick up a fresh copy from under a sign that reads: "Controversial. #1 Seller!" Then he can take the copy up front and pay, asking for a sack, please.

The fear of discovery is wholly irrational.

And worse, it's laughable.

But Houston has mentored more than a dozen kids, and various parents know him, and countless teachers and administrators would recognize him on sight. Those are all exactly the kinds of people who might be browsing in a book store on a warm October night, which is why he takes precautions, and why he feels secretly nervous, stepping outside and strolling to his car with a forced nonchalance.

No parking slots are left at his apartment's lot. Houston's forced to leave his little car on the street. As he enters the building, he finds half a dozen neighbors and their friends on their way to a Halloween party. All are in costume, and drunk. The party must have a theme; everyone wears the same full mask, the adult Phillip Stevens reborn with rubber and fake hair.

"Out of our way!" one man shouts.

"Genetic superiority coming through!" says another.

A woman says, "Stop that," and slaps a hand off her ass. Then she slides up against Houston, beery breath telling him, "You look different. You look awfully cute!"

"He's not," says the first man.

"He's inferior," says the second man.

Then they're past him. And Houston stands on the bottom stair for a long while, doing nothing but breathing, holding tight to the rail with his free hand.

4. *YOU POP OUT OF THE WORMHOLE AND FIND YOURSELF INSIDE A clear thick gel. This universe is a thick transparent goo that goes on forever.*

Fire your engines, and you can move.

But barely, and your hull creaks and groans, and the instant you stop your engines, your ship comes to an abrupt halt.

Now a monster swims out of the gelatin. It dwarfs the largest whale, and it's covered with tree-sized hairs that beat like oars, carrying it straight at you.

What do you do?

No, that weapon won't work here.

*And that one won't kill it.
Just pisses it off, in fact.
So what now?*

You can run, but the monster is faster. It's ready to eat you and your ship. Whole. And you've got four seconds to think this through and tell me: Where are you?

Now three seconds.

And two.

And one.

M

R. CROSS," John blurts. "There's something new here!"

Houston fights the temptation to look for himself. Instead, he sits back and watches the boy twist at the knobs, his jaw dropping an instant before he leaps back. Dramatic, overdone. "God, it's huge!"

"Draw it," Houston coaches.

"Okay. I'll try!"

The boys and mentor have set up an aquarium at the back of the classroom—five gallons of tapwater with its chlorine removed, then sweetened with straw and oxygenated with a simple airstone. Over the past five days, using Troy's donated microscope, they've watched the microbial community explode and evolve, bacteria followed by hungry paramecium—the "monsters" of the gel universe—and now the paramecium are serving as fodder for an even larger, more wondrous monster.

"It's got wheels," John reports.

"Where?"

"On this end," John commands the circles in his drawing to spin, giving his creation a liveliness. "They go around and around, then stop. And then they go again."

"How big is it?"

"Huge," the boy declares. Then he peers into the eyepiece with his right eye—none of the boys can resist pinching his left closed—and suddenly, with a quieter, more honest astonishment, he says, "Jesus, it ate one!"

"One what?"

"One of the parameciums. I saw it!"

Houston picks up the workpad, trying to remember when he first saw a rotifer swimming across a glass slide.

"You should look at it, Mr. Cross. Look!"

Anticipation makes the mouth dry. He bends over the microscope, the fine adjustment knob spinning easily between finger and thumb. As promised, the rotifer seems vast. And as if answering his wish, he watches while one of the football-shaped protozoans is caught in that intricate mouth, spinning hairs pulling the transparent carcass inside a transparent body.

Water eating water.

When you got down to it, that's what it's all about.

T

HE WOMAN TEACHES SCIENCE at a different school. Their relationship is three years old, and it is convenient, and it has mostly run its course. They see each other infrequently. But as it happens, she's at Houston's apartment on that weekend evening when the television interrupts them, saying, "Breaking news."

"Not now," he tells it.

But the machine obeys its rigorous instructions. "Important, breaking news."

"Maybe the President's been shot," says the woman. Then she sits up and says, "Anyway, I probably need to get home." She pulls a heavy sweater over her head, speaking through the frizzy red wool. "I want to see this news first."

"Show us," says Houston.

"—the gunman apparently turned the weapon on himself, committing suicide. At least 14 students died, while nine more are hos-

pitalized, six in critical condition—"

"Where is this?" Houston asks.

"Australian Independent—"

"From the beginning. Now."

Schools always look like schools. Houston stares at a glass and brick building as the narrator reports, "Today, an unidentified male walked into the Riverview School for the Gifted, shouted inflammatory phrases, then produced a pair of handguns, killing more than a dozen boys in their early teens—"

"Shit," says the woman.

Houston is silent.

"All of the deceased, and all but two of the injured, are clones of Phillip Stevens. At this point, it's assumed that the murderer was singling them out"

On screen, grim-faced paramedics are carrying dark sacks. Some of the sacks seem heavy, while others are less so.

The woman sits next to Houston, exhaling hard.

She says, "Shit," quietly. Then with a different voice, "Have you seen my rings?"

"On the kitchen counter." She always leaves her diamond and wedding band on the counter.

But she doesn't move. Instead, she places a damp hand on Houston's bare knee, telling him, "This sounds horrible. But I'm surprised that it's taken this long for this sort of tragedy to happen. You know?"

He doesn't speak.

His lover gives him a few seconds, then asks, "What are you thinking?"

He stares at those rubber sacks set in a ragged row, and he thinks that it's odd. As they are now, robbed of their faces and souls, those boys have never looked more alike.

"WE'LL HAVE NEW SECURITY MEASURES. NATURALLY." MS. LINDSTRUM whispers, trying to keep her words private. It's a week after the Riverview Massacre, but there have already been three more attacks. In France. In White Russia. And two PS's dead in Boston. "Cameras in the hallway," she promises. "At least one armed guard stationed in the front office. And all of us who work directly with the boys ... we'll naturally have to go through an extensive security check ..."

"I've already been scrutinized," says Houston. "Six years ago."

"It's a formality," she assures.

He doesn't mention the obvious: Any determined person can kill these boys anywhere in time and space. No reasonable amount of security will protect them. And unreasonable security will just make their lives more constricted, and their murders more noteworthy.

Houston doesn't say one word, watching Troy working at the back of the room.

"You did speak with them?" Ms. Lindstrum inquires. "About what happened in Australia, I mean."

"That next day," he says.

"How were they?"

"John was shaken. 'Killing someone is always awful,' he told me." Houston closes his eyes, the voices and faces coming back to him. "Troy acted sad, and sorry. But I don't think he appreciates what happened. It's on the other end of the world, and I think his mother shields him from the news. So none of it's quite real."

"And Mike?"

"Pissed, more than anything."

"That's sounds like him," she chimes in.

But it wasn't a simple anger. The boy had made fists and drummed on the top of his desk, growling, "It won't happen to me."

"It won't, but why not?" Houston had asked.

"I'm not the same as the others. I look different." He nodded, explaining with an amoral practicality, "If some asshole comes to school firing, he's going to shoot John first. Then Troy. And finally me. Except I'll have run away by then!"

Houston neglects to mention any of that conversation.

Misreading his grim expression, Ms. Lindstrum says, "I wouldn't worry. This is a good community, in its heart. Nothing tragic's going to happen here."

He just looks at her.

She starts to ask, "What are you thinking?"

But just then Troy spins in his chair, calling out, "Mr. Cross? I found a baby snail. Want to see?"

"Do I ever!" he blurts. "Do I ever!"

IT IS AN HONOR, Mr. Cross. Houston. May I call you Houston? And thanks for taking the trouble. I know this has to be an imposition."

"It isn't," Houston lies.

The school district's headquarters are set inside a sprawling single-story building designed on some now-defunct principle of efficiency and/or emotional warmth. The central area is one vast room. Working areas are divided by partial walls and overly green plastic foliage. The ventilation system produces a constant roar, not unlike the Brownian drumming of atoms against a starship's hull. Over that roar, the man in charge of security says, "I mean it. It's an honor to cross paths, sir. We have so much trouble finding good mentors, and keeping them. Which makes you something of a legend around here."

Houston gives a little nod. "What can I do for you?"

"Very little." The man looks and sounds like a retired police officer. A military cop, perhaps. Dragging a thick hand across the hairless scalp, he says, "You used to be ... what's the term ...? A professional student. At two universities. Is that right?"

"Yes."

He glances at his monitor. "Your resumé lists several impressive degrees."

"I have a trust fund," says Houston. "A little one. It gives me enough security for that kind of lifestyle."

"Good for you," says the cop. Without inflection.

Houston waits.

"Then you moved here and took up mentoring ... six years ago. Correct?"

"Correct."

Again the hand is dragged across the scalp. "Now I couldn't help but notice. You didn't work with PS's until this year."

"I guess I didn't. No."

The cop sits motionless, clear eyes regarding Houston without suspicion.

"The boys were too young," Houston offers. "As a rule, I work with middle-schoolers."

**Many chose chemical or clinical abortions.
And there was a deluge of orphaned babies. . .**

"That's what I thought." He nudges the monitor just enough to let both of them skim over a life's history.

Houston read dates, places.

He says nothing.

"Of course there were two boys... older ones who skipped grades ... and they were kicking around your current school before the others...."

"True enough." Then with a flat, matter-of-fact voice, Houston points out, "I had other students then. Two girls and a boy. And I felt a certain loyalty to them."

"Good for you."

Silence.

The monitor is eased aside, glare hiding whatever it shows now. The clear eyes grow a little less so, and with a pained voice, the cop

says, "I'm awfully sorry. I'm required to ask these questions, sir."

"Go on," says Houston.

"Are you a member of the Defenders of the Womb?"

"No."

"Do you know anyone who you suspect could be a member?"

"No."

"How about the Birth-Righters?"

"God, no."

"Like I said, I have to ask." He pauses, considering his next words. Or not. Perhaps this is a game that he's played too many times, and he has to remind himself what comes next. "Mr. Cross," he says. "I mean Houston. Have you read any of the anti-PS literature or watched the associated digitals?"

Houston sets his jaw, and waits.

"I'm sure you know what I mean, sir. There's some awful things being published. That crazy in Australia had stacks of the stuff"

"*The Cuckoo's Boys*," says Houston.

"Excuse me?"

"That book was in the crazy's stacks. As I recall."

"Perhaps. But honestly, it isn't on my list of dangerous works."

"Isn't it?" Houston leans forward, asking his interrogator, "Why not?"

"It isn't in the same category as those other works," he claims, "since it never advocates murder."

"No, it doesn't," Houston agrees.

"The boys are the blameless product of an evil man."

"Says Paul Kaan."

"Who used to work for Phillip Stevens. As I recall, they were colleagues and friends." The eyes lift and grow distant. "The moral thing to do is to give the PS's useful lives. But to protect our species, they have to be sterilized, too."

The ventilation's rumbling fades away.

"It sounds like you know the book," says Houston.

But the man won't be caught so easily. "I'm just repeating what I've seen on television, sir. That's all."

"But what if?" asks Houston. "What if Congress decides to pass laws and perform a simple clinical procedure on every boy ...?"

"Well what, Mr. Cross?"

"What's your feeling about that?"

"My only concern, sir, is that there is no violence inside our schools."

Houston nods, sitting back again.

The cop glances down, then asks, "Do you own a firearm, sir?"

"No."

"Do you possess bomb-making materials?"

"Yes."

The eyes lift and grow large.

An angry laugh, then Houston explains, "I've got a well-stocked kitchen, and there's a filling station at the end of the block. So in theory, yes, I can make a substantial bomb. Anytime I want."

"That's not the best answer. Sir."

"Then no, I don't have bomb-making materials."

"Good. Thank you." The eyes dip again, and quietly, speaking as much to himself as Houston, he says, "This is what you do all day, isn't it, sir? These little mind games ...?"

5. YOU EMERGE FROM THE WORMHOLE, WHAT YOU SEE IS BLACKNESS.
Perfect, endless blackness.

But as your eyes adapt, you begin to make out a faint curtain of light in front of you. And behind you. And above. And below. Now, what do you do ...?

M

IKE STARTS TO SAY, "Sensors," before catching his mistake.

He grimaces instead, then tells Houston, "I'll use my thermometer. I put it in the airlock. What does it read?"

"About two degrees."

"Kelvin?"

"Yes."

The boy stares at his starship's newest incarnation. It's still armored and bristling with weapons, but now bubble-like portholes line its sides, and the robotic crew has shrunk to human proportions.

"All right," says Mike. "I use my barometer. What does it say?"

"Nothing."

"It doesn't work?"

"No. It's reading nothing. Zero."

"Pure vacuum." He nods, muttering, "I'm out in space somewhere." Houston waits.

"Okay. I shoot my antimatter cannon. What happens?"

"Eventually, the shell strikes the curtain of light, and its surface gets bright for as long as it's passing through. But the curtain's very thin, and most of the shell's mass continues on its merry way."

"I get it. There's not much stuff there, is there?" He nods again, then says, "Okay. I follow it."

"Okay."

"And I reach the curtain?"

"Eventually."

"Can I get through?"

"Eventually."

"What's 'eventually' mean?"

"A few million years, give or take."

"But my throttle's all the way open!" The boy leans back, licking his lips. "In a vacuum, I'd be going nearly light speed!"

Houston says, "Agreed."

"Okay. I stop inside the curtain. What happens?"

"It swirls around you. Like a slow, slow fog."

"I take a sample."

"How?"

Frustration builds, then collapses into resignation. "Okay. I put a jelly jar in the airlock, then open the outer door, and some of the fog drifts into the jar. All right?"

"Fine."

"I screw down the lid and bring the sample to the lab."

Houston says nothing.

"And I put everything in my best microscope. What do I see?"

"Lights. Tiny, bright-colored points of light."

The boy licks his lips, eyes narrowed, one hand absently sweeping the hair out of his baffled eyes.

"Most of the lights are dim and red," Houston adds. "Others are yellow. And the brightest few are blue."

"What about—?"

Houston shouts, "Wow!"

The boy halfway jumps. "What happened?"

"A big flash of light!"

"Outside somewhere?"

"No. From the jar."

"How big?" He shakes his head, asking, "Is there damage?"

"You're blind now."

"Okay. I pop in new eyes. Now what do I see?"

"One of those tiny blue lights has vanished. That's the only change."

Mike rises to his feet. Trying to concentrate, he steps up to the window, staring at the falling snow as one hand, then the other, plays with his shaggy hair.

Several minutes later, he screams, "Jesus!"

He smiles and says to the snow, "You made me huge. Didn't you?"

6. JUNGLE. AND A BLUE, BLUE SEA.

Swimming in the warm water are fish not too different from our fish, and creatures that resemble porpoises, and something with a round body and paddles and a tiny head stuck on the end of a long, long neck—

A

PLESIOSAUR," JOHN BLURTS.

"Exactly." A pause, then Houston adds, "Up in the sky, as close as the Moon now, is a comet. In a few hours, it's going to hit exactly where you are now. It's going to vaporize the water and the limestone below, then set fire to North America, and the world."

John winces. Then in a self-conscious way, giggles.

"What do you want to do, John?"

"I want to watch the plesiosaur. I've always liked them."

Houston knows that. Last night, his AI found a new documentary on Danish TV, and for the next 30 minutes, he plays the subtitled digital on the classroom screen. Then comes lunch. The new semester has a break in the middle of the period. The mentor is expected to fend for himself. And naturally, he doesn't get paid for time not spent teaching.

When John returns, Houston outlines the situation again.

But this time he closes by saying, "In a very few hours, your plesiosaur, and almost everything else on Earth, is going to be dead."

John winces. No giggles.

"Fly up to the comet," Houston suggests. "If you want."

"I guess."

"The coma is beautiful. And the tail extends for millions of miles." He shows him photographs of last year's big comet. "Inside the coma you find a black ball of tar and buried snows. It's barely 10 miles across. If you want, you can stop it now."

"I can?"

"You've got weapons," Houston points out. "What would you use if you wanted to move a mountain-sized snowball?"

"My engines. They'd melt anything."

"Do you want to use them?"

"I don't get it, Mr. Cross. What are you asking?"

"Why would you stop the comet? And why wouldn't you?"

"Well," says the boy. Then he licks the tentative hairs over his upper lip, and breathes deeply, and says, "If dinosaurs go on living, then maybe mammals wouldn't get their chance. Which would be bad for us. For human beings."

Houston leans forward, saying, "You're going to let the comet hit. Aren't you?"

The boy doesn't answer, eyes tracking from side to side.

"Would you like to see the comet's impact?" Houston offers. "I found a real good Japanese simulation. It's accurate, and it's spectacular, too."

John shakes his head.

"No, thank you," he says. "But Mike would like it, I bet."

"He loved it," Houston confides.

The boy makes fists and drums softly on his desk.

"What about the comet, John? Are you going to leave it alone?"

"No," the boy squeaks.

Houston tries to hide his surprise. Then after a few deep breaths, he asks, "Why?" with a quiet voice. "If it means there'll never be humans—"

"Good," says the boy.

Once. Softly. But with a hardwon conviction.

7. YOU'VE DECIDED TO BECOME A CAT FARMER.

No, seriously. I mean it.

You can make a lot of money selling cat skins. And since you're

left with carcasses after you skin them, you start feeding that meat to the new kittens. Who grow up into your next harvest of cats. Which you feed to the next litters of kittens. And so on. And so on. Cats all the way ...

Now, what's wrong with that plan?

Troy says, "Nothing," without hesitation. He thinks this is gross and clever.

"But," Houston warns, "you're losing energy at every stage. A cat burns calories to keep itself warm, and it's got a short gut that doesn't digest everything that it eats. That's why your dog chews on your cat's turds. They're full of energy."

"Ugh." Giggles.

The others understood the problem almost immediately. "Try it this way," says Houston. "How much meat would you have to eat every day? In order to eat enough, I mean."

"Ten pounds," the boy guesses.

"Forty quarter-pound hamburgers. Really?"

"Maybe not." Troy shakes his head, licks his lips. "How about two pounds?"

"Fine." Houston nods. "On the first day of school, you'll go to the cafeteria and eat your daily ration. Two pounds of grilled seventh-grader."

"You mean like Mike?"

"Exactly."

"Neat!"

"And you'll do that for a full year. Two pounds worth of seventh-graders every day. Which is more than seven hundred pounds in all."

"Mike's not that big. Not yet."

Both of them laugh. Hard. Then Houston says, "Remember. A body is bone and gruesome crap that you'd never eat. Maybe half of the carcass won't get on your plate. So how many seventh-graders are you going to need?"

Troy hammers out a reasonable estimate. "Ten."

"How many eighth-graders are in your class?"

"I don't know. Three hundred?"

"So we need three thousand seventh-graders. And you can't just lock them in a room and pull one out whenever you're hungry. They need their food, too."

"Sixth-graders!"

"How many?"

"I don't know ... God, 30 thousand ...!"

"Right." Houston leans forward, and smiles. "But remember, Troy. Teachers can be awfully hungry people, too."

The boy's face grows a little pale.

"Three hundred eighth-graders feed how many teachers?"

"Thirty." He sickens, but just for a moment. Then the eyes quicken, and for that instant, in his face and eyes, Troy is indistinguishable from the other PS's.

"There's three principals. Right?"

"I guess there would be. Yes." Houston sits back in his chair, then asks, "Who's left standing? At the end of the year, I mean."

Troy sees it instantly.

"Only the principals. Right?"

"Right."

Then he's laughing too hard to breathe, and he gasps, and he admits to Houston, "I'm not going to tell Mom about this lesson. No, I'm not!"

8. YOU GIVE BIRTH TO A CHILD WHO ISN'T YOURS. GENETICALLY speaking.

Phillip Stevens hijacks your reproductive system and forces you into having his clone, just as he did with millions of blameless women. Yet you feel blamed. And of course you're bitter. It's only reasonable to play the role of the victim here.

It's only human to want revenge.

But it's also human to be better than that. To forgive, or at least to forget. To accept and hold and cherish this gift ...

... a better son, frankly, than anything you would have spawned on your own ...

Saturday morning, and Houston shops for next week's groceries.

He spots the boy at the end of a long aisle, and for a half-instant, he isn't sure. It could be another PS, or even just a boy who happens to resemble them. But something about the don't-give-an-inch stance and the habitual pushing of hair out of the eyes tells him that it's Mike. Which means that the tiny woman next to him, lowering a blood-colored roast into the cart, must be his mother.

Two aisles later, paths cross.

The boy calls him, "Houston." Then he does a thumb-pointing gesture, telling Mom, "This is the guy."

She's holding a box of tampons. Without blinking, she throws them into the cart, then offers a tiny hand. "The famous Mr. Cross. Finally. Believe it or not, I've been meaning to get in touch."

"It's a pleasure," he replies.

"Groceries?" she inquires, gesturing at his cart.

"They are," he admits.

"What do you think of these prices?"

"They're high," Houston volunteers.

"Ridiculous," she grouses. Then just as the conversation seems doomed to canned chatter, Mom tells him, "You know, my boy hates you."

"Pardon?"

"You drive him nuts. Goofy nuts. I mean, he knows that he's smarter than his brother and sister. And his parents, of course, are perfect idiots—"

"Shut up," Mike growls. "You old lady."

Mom has a good laugh, then continues. "Anyway, Mr. Cross. Thank you. You've been getting under his skin. Which is the best thing for him, I think."

Mike says, "Jesus," and stomps in a circle.

His mother takes a step toward Houston, smiling up at him, and with a conspirator's urgent voice, says, "Humble him. Please."

"I try," Houston confesses.

"Fucking Jesus!" Mike moans, squirming in every sense.

Mom turns and glares at her son, her mouth ready to reprimand. Or encourage. Houston can't guess which. But instead of speaking, she looks back at Houston and gives him an odd little smile.

Again, he says, "It's been a pleasure."

Then he takes his cart and his expensive groceries and moves on.

THE FIELD TRIP is the result of a lot of pleading and a slippery set of excuses. At first, John says, "You've got to eat lunch. Eat it at my house. It's just a short walk from school." But when Houston firmly refuses, the boy adds, "I've got books you'd like to see. Old ones. About science and stuff."

"What books?"

Their titles escape him. But they're about dinosaurs and flying saucers, and John adds, "I can't bring them here. They're practically antiques, and something might happen!"

Last week, there was a fight at school. Houston didn't see it, but Ms. Lindstrum reported that John was showing his starship to one of his few friends, and another boy stole his workpad. John couldn't stop himself from throwing the first punch. His only punch, it seems. He still sports an ugly maroon bruise beside his left eye.

"Mr. Cross," he pleads. "Please come over?"

The boy is sick with loneliness. But Houston has to tell him, "We need a better reason. If we're going to get permission, we'll need something special that ties directly to our work here."

The next day, John bursts into the room. "Okay. How's this? We've got a huge stump in our back yard. Hundreds of tree rings showing. Maybe we could do some sort of study, counting back in time and looking at the weather. That kind of stuff."

"Good enough," Houston tells him.

But the Facilitator has doubts. "It's not up to me anymore," Ms. Lindstrum explains. "If it involves PS's, we'll need permission from the superintendent's office."

Houston nods, then says, "The boy really wants this."

"Can you blame him?"

Houston didn't know that he was.

She promises to make the request. And for the next full week, John's first question every day is, "When are we going?"

"Never," seems like a possible answer.

But suddenly the faceless powers grant their blessing. Appropriate disclaimers are filled out. A parental signature is produced. And like explorers bound for some great adventure, the two of them pack up their equipment and make the four-block trek to an anonymous split level on a quiet side street.

All the way there, John is giddy with excitement.

Effusive to a sickening pitch.

Five years old, at the most.

He tells silly jokes about farts and singing frogs. He boasts that he'll be a great scientist before he's 30. With an overdone clumsiness, he trips on a crack in the sidewalk and drops in a slow-motion tumble into his own front yard. Then he suddenly grows quiet and thoughtful, saying, "By the way. Mom's boyfriend is gone. Moved out gone, I mean."

The trap is revealed.

Entering the front door, John cries out, "We're here!"

Mom can't look any less prepared for company. Bare feet. Jeans worn white against the chunky ass. A sweatshirt of some unearthly green. Physically, she bears no resemblance to her son. Chinese and European. Pretty in a fucked-over way. Sleepy, teary eyes regard this onslaught with a genuine horror. "Oh," she finally exclaims. "That's today, isn't it?"

The boy drops his workpad on the floor. "Mom!"

But the woman recovers. "Just a minute! Be right there!" She gallops out of sight, and from the back of the house screams, "Food's in the fridge, hun!"

"She forgets things," says John, shaking from anger.

"Don't worry about it," Houston tells him. His voice is angry, too. But the inflection goes unnoticed.

Lunch is egg-salad sandwiches with off-brand pop to wash them down.

Mom returns during an Oreo dessert. Her clothes have improved—newer jeans and aerobics shoes—and she's washed her face and combed her hair. But obviously, she'd rather be anywhere else. With anyone else. A condition that gives the adults common ground.

"I'm glad to meet you," she tells Houston.

"And I'm glad to meet you," he echoes.

Houston turns to the boy and says, "Maybe we should get busy. You think?"

"Oh, sure. Why not?"

They have only a few minutes to invest in the promised tree stump. Which is ample, since it's too old and weathered to teach much more than the fact that wood rots. Standing over that brown mass of fungi and carpenter ants, John looks at him expectantly and says, "Well?"

Houston imagines a dozen responses, and John's black disappointment. So he says simply, "Interesting," without defining what it is that interests him.

John hears what he wants, and for the next week, pesters Houston shamelessly.

He says, "I'm worried about my mother. She's too lonely."

He says, "You know, there's a new restaurant up on Acer. I'd take Mom, but I don't have the money."

In a pleading tone, he confesses, "You're my best friend in the world, Mr. Cross. I mean that!"

Then, the pestering stops.

And Houston discovers that he misses the boy's clumsy match-making. He misses it but doesn't say so, knowing better than to trust his own weakness. Then one day the boy arrives with a purple bruise matching the last one, and Houston asks, "Did you fight that same jerk? I hope not."

"I didn't," John mutters.

Then he looks past Houston, a cold glare matching the accusing voice. "The boyfriend's back. Again."

I KNOW THIS SEEMS IMPOLITE. I got your address from one of last year's parents—"

"Come in, Mrs. Holdenmeister."

"You've probably got plans for tonight."

"Not really." He offers her the sofa, then sits opposite her. Looking at those hard blue eyes, he secretly thinks, "You're one scary bitch."

"What can I do for you?" he inquires.

"About Troy," she mutters. Pale hands turn to fists. "About that grade—"

"The B+?"

"You're his mentor. You know how much he adores science."

"Absolutely."

"I just don't think ... after he earned A's last semester ..."

"We had a big project this quarter. He had to do his own research and write a paper about what he learned—"

"Didn't he?"

I have to wonder if maybe, once you saw that PS baby... maybe you put a pillow over him and GAVE him a few good shoves...

They chat. It's polite, rigorously simple chatter. How long has Houston been a mentor? How long have they lived here? What about this warm weather? How was the sandwich, and does anyone want any more cookies?

Adults know how to be polite.

They can converse for hours, revealing nothing about their true selves.

Yet John is visibly thrilled by their prattle. He grins more and more. Mom finally asks, "Aren't you supposed to be doing a project?" And he tells her, "There's still time," without glancing at the clock.

Eventually, the kitchen grows silent.

"No, actually." He says it flat out, then sits back and asks, "Did you come here by yourself, Mrs. Holdenmeister?"

She starts to ask, "Why?" Then she shakes her head, admitting, "My husband's in the car. Waiting." With an indiscriminate rage, she admits, "He doesn't think that I should be going to this much trouble—"

"He's right."

She hesitates. Then after measuring him with those deadly eyes, she says, "I saw Troy's paper. I saw it, and it was very good."

"Because you helped him write it."

She flusters easily, nothing about it genuine. "I don't think that's true ...!"

"I asked him. And your son has a wicked streak of honesty."

She hesitates again, not sure what to say.

"It's a quarterly grade," he reminds her, "and it's a B+. Which is very respectable, Mrs. Holdenmeister."

"Even still," she snaps, "it's on his permanent record."

"Fuck his record. Ma'am."

She swallows. Goes limp.

"We both know, he's not like the others. He doesn't function as well in science. And he won't be anyone's valedictorian." Houston says it, then takes a long deep breath. Then, "Which aren't crimes. And in some ways, those are probably blessings."

"I ... I don't know what to say here ..."

"Let him do his own work. I'll give him a nice little A at the end of the year, and it won't mean shit in 10 years. Or two, for that matter."

Fists pull close to her belly. "You've got an ugly, awful attitude, Mr. Cross."

"Guilty as charged."

She mistakes his indifference for weakness. "I plan to complain. To the superintendent himself. A person like you shouldn't be working with impressionable young minds."

That's when Houston's rage takes hold of him.

Suddenly his mouth takes charge, asking, "What exactly did you do to your son? To make him this way, I mean."

She goes pale, except for the blazing eyes.

"Watching you ..." he sputters. "Seeing all this damned guilt masquerading as love ... I have to wonder if maybe, once you saw that PS baby ... maybe you put a pillow over him and gave him a few good shoves before you got too scared to finish the job ...!"

"Shut up!" she screams.

And rises.

Then with a tight, furious voice, she whispers, "I had a drinking problem. While I was pregnant. You son-of-a-bitch."

He says nothing.

Feels nothing, he believes.

For an instant, she shivers hard enough to lose her balance. Then she puts her hand against the wall, and says, again, "You're a horrible man."

"Tell me what I don't know."

She tries to murder him with her eyes.

It nearly works, it seems. But Houston makes himself stand, facing her, telling her simply, "You'd better go, Mrs. Holdenmeister. Now."

9. I WANT YOU TO INVENT A WORLD, A UNIVERSE, FOR THE OTHER BOYS.

I'll send them there. In their starships, they'll explore and decipher the mysteries that you leave for them. And maybe they'll escape in the end, and maybe they won't. Which means, in other words, if you want to make a dangerous place, you can do that.

You've got my blessing.

Just as they have the same blessing, and that's all the fair warning I'm going to give you ... okay ...?

Is it John's world, or Troy's?"

"Does that matter?"

"No," says Mike. Then, "Yes." He licks his lips, drums his fists, then tells Houston, "I bet it's Troy's."

"Why?"

"Because it's neat. You know. Not sloppy."

A map of the world covers the long screen. It has two blue seas and a brilliant dash of icecap, and its single continent is yellow except where it's brown. It is not sloppy because it's authentic. The image comes with NASA's compliments, and what Mike sees has been fitted together from a thousand fuzzy, partial images gathered by orbiting telescopes. The physical and chemical data are equally authentic.

But what waits on the world's surface belongs entirely to John.

"I'm not going to tell you who did this," Houston warns. "Just like I won't tell the others which world is yours."

"You'd better not," he growls.

"What are you going to do first, Mike? You've got a mission here."

"I'll fire my cannon. Ten times."

Houston says nothing.

"Well, can I?"

The mentor says, "If you want," and shakes his head sadly.

"Okay. I do it, and what happens?"

"The explosions melt the icecap, boil the oceans, then cause the crust to turn to magma."

"Neat!"

Houston says nothing.

"Is there anything left alive down there?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

The boy describes his flight into the hell. Crocus, the top robot, collects samples of atmosphere and liquid rock. Mentor and student agree that nothing lives there. Even if there had been a thriving biosphere, it was vaporized, leaving not so much as a fossil tooth to mark its glorious past and promise.

"Congratulations," says Houston, the word tipped in acid.

But Mike just shrugs and says, "That was easy." Then he's laughing, admitting, "I don't know why I was so worried."

HALF AN HOUR LATER, THE BELL RINGS.

Houston accompanies Mike to the door. The hallway is already jammed with scurrying bodies and sharp, overly-loud voices. The boy, still proud of his carnage, grins and wades out into the current. A bigger, older boy drives an elbow into him. But it's barely felt. Mike reaches his locker and touches the lock, then slams it hard against the steel. And then John appears beside him, touching him on the arm, obviously asking him, "Which world did you get? Which world? Which world? Which?"

Houston can see their faces, can halfway read their lips.

He watches as Mike glances up at this older, fatter boy, and showing the most malicious grin, the boy says, "Two oceans. And some kind of yellow land."

John can't resist. He confesses, "That's mine!"

Mike says something like, "Was it?"

Then John asks a "What'd you think, what'd you do" sort of question.

And Mike tells him. With both hands, he creates the universal symbol of an explosion, and loud enough to be heard, he says, "Boom!"

There's no time to intercede.

Before Houston can force his way through the bystanders and into the fight, John has already slammed Mike's head into the lockers. At least three times. Maybe four. And Mike counters with a fist into the belly, leaving his attacker on his knees, gasping and pale and crying for every reason imaginable.

IT'S JUST US for the next few days," Houston explains.

But Troy already knows the news. There's nothing bigger in a school than a bloody brawl. Unless of course it's when two PS's are doing the brawling.

Troy shakes his head, asking, "Why did they fight?"

Houston starts to offer the simple explanation, then hesitates. It occurs to him that he barely knows either boy, much less their real motivations, and thinking that he understands them is dangerous, and stupid, and very much a waste.

So instead, he admits, "I really don't know why they fought, or why they seem to hate each other so much."

"I know," the boy tells him.

Anticipation makes Houston lean forward. "Why, Troy?"

"They've got to," he assures.

"But why?"

With an endearing patience, the boy shakes his head, warning him,

"You can't know it, Mr. Cross.

"You might want to. But you just don't belong."

10. AGAIN, YOUR STARSHIP IS TINY. MICROSCOPIC. SUSPENDED WITHIN that vast ocean, living water swimming through the dead.

But this time the monster isn't some marauding paramecium. This time what you see has a blunt head and a long ropy tail, and it isn't feeding. Instead it's moving with a singleness of purpose, passing you and your ship without the smallest regard.

In anger, or maybe out of simple curiosity, you fire your weapons at it.

The monster wriggles and dies.

And just like that, Phillip Stevens is never born. And you, all of you, instantly and forever cease to exist.

I'm not going to ask why.

It's easy enough to see the reason.

And I won't dwell on the paradoxes inherent in this mess.

No, what I want to ask is the hardest question of all: Is this world better off without Phillip and the PS's? Or is it worse off?

That's the only question worth asking.

And you can't give me any answer. Sixty years from now, maybe. But not today. Not here. You're smart but not that smart. And even in 60 years, I doubt if you'll look me in the eye—all the thousands and thousands of you—and to the man, you will say in one indistinguishable voice, "The world is better off," or, "It's worse."

The best questions are always that way ...

The Sun is plunging behind the Moon.

At its height, the eclipse will reach 80+ percent coverage. Which is a long way from a total eclipse, yes. But since it is a warm, cloudless day, and it's noon, the effect is dramatic. There comes a growing chill to the air. A sense of misplaced twilight. Houston twists his head and says, "Listen." But hundreds of students are scattered across the school's lawn, enjoying the cosmic event, and it's hard to hear anything but their endless roar. "Listen to the birds," he tells them.

Both boys nod in the same way, John saying, "I hear them. They're singing."

Troy points and cries out, "Look!"

Swallows have appeared, streaking back and forth.

Then a younger voice says, "Look under the trees."

Mike stands behind them. Smiling, but not. Horizontal cuts mark where his face struck the vent on his locker. And he seems taller than before. Houston noticed it yesterday—Mike's first day back from his suspension—but it's more obvious now. A growth spurt took him during his week-long suspension, adding a goodly fraction of an inch to his gangly frame.

"The way the light is," he says. Pointing.

John sits up. "Yeah, look! What's going on, Mr. Cross?"

Crescent-shaped splashes of light dapple a sidewalk and the shady grass. Houston stands, hands on hips. "I don't know," he lies. "What do you think? Guesses?"

"It's the eclipse," Troy volunteers.

"Duh," says Mike.

Houston reprimands him with a look. Then as he starts to ask his next question, he notices a group of kids staring at them. Talking among themselves. Eighth-graders. Every last one of them female.

Houston's boys are oblivious to the stares.

Mike drops to the ground. He sits as far as possible from John while still being part of their group. "It's got something to do with how the light bends," he volunteers. "It's like you can see the Sun in those little crescent things."

Troy says, "I bet so."

Then John says, "This would have been a full eclipse back in dinosaur times."

"Why?" asks Troy.

"The Moon was closer," Mike tells him.

"It covered more of the Sun back then," John adds.

Troy turns. "Is that right, Mr. Cross?"

He starts to nod, then notices one of the girls approaching them. The hesitation in her walk and the other girls' giggles implies this is a dare. Instead of speaking, Houston holds his breath, and all the boys grow silent, too. She's a tall, willowy creature with full breasts and a model's face. And in a voice that comes wrapped in a nervous, electric energy, she says, "Hi, you guys."

Then she turns, and sprints back to her friends.

"What the fuck was that?" Mike growls. "What the fuck?"

But Houston laughs out loud, saying, "That." Saying, "Is a woman enamored." Saying, "I know the look. And you just better get used to it, boys."

A

T LEAST I CAN SEE HIM NOW," SHE SAYS. "CAN YOU?"

"Barely," says the short man.

"I've never gotten a writer's autograph. Have you?"

"I'm not much of a reader."

"Neither am I," she confesses. Then she turns to Houston, asking him, "Have you ever read anything better than this?"

He glances at the woman. Then he looks up the long line, saying, "Yes."

She doesn't seem to notice. Holding her copy of *The Cuckoo's Boys* in both hands, she tells everyone in earshot, "It had to be said. What Dr. Kaan says here."

Houston manages to keep silent.

This is a Saturday afternoon. He drove two hundred miles to stand here. The author sits in the center of a long table, flanked by thousands of copies of his phenomenal bestseller. "The New Edition," reads the overhead banner. "New Chapters! Fresh, Innovative Proposals!"

The short man asks, "Do you know what's in the new chapters?"

"I'm dying to find out," she confesses.

Houston waits. Then after a while, he says, "Tailored viruses."

"Excuse me?" says the woman.

"Kaan thinks we should create a virus that would target Phillip Stevens' genetics. It would destroy the clones' somatic cells. In other words, their sperm."

She says, "Good."

The line slips forward.

Houston finds himself breathing harder, fighting the urge to speak. A pretty young woman says, "Please, open your book. One copy, only. To the page you want signed. And please, don't ask for any personalized inscriptions."

The author wears a three-piece suit. He looks fit and hardy, and smug.

Houston avoids looking at the man's eyes.

The line moves.

With both hands, the woman in front of Houston opens her book.

The short man bends and mutters something to the author, getting nothing but a signature for his trouble.

The woman takes his place, gushing, "I'm so glad to meet you. Sir!"

Kaan smiles and signs his name, then looks past her.

Houston's legs are like concrete. Suddenly, he is aware of his pounding heart and a mouth suddenly gone dry. But he steps forward, and quietly says, "You know, I have a PS son," as he hands his opened book forward. "And I took your good advice."

The author's face rises, eyes huge and round.

"I cut off his nuts. Want to see 'em?" Houston asks, reaching into a pocket.

"Help!" the author squeals.

A pair of burly men appear, grabbing Houston and dragging him outside with the rough efficiency of professionals. Then after a quick body search, they place him in his car, and one man suggests, "You should go home, sir. Now."

"All right," Houston agrees.

They leave him, but then linger at the bookstore's front door.

Houston twists the rear-view mirror, looking at his own face. Tanned and narrow, and in the brown eyes, tired. He thinks hard about everything until nothing else can be accomplished. Which takes about 30 seconds. And that's when he starts the engine and pulls out into traffic, feeling very light and free, and in the strangest ways, happy.

11. YOU GET AN END-OF-THE-SCHOOL-YEAR FIELD TRIP OUT OF ME.

I always, always take my students down to our little community's renowned natural history museum. Most have already been there. According to one boy, maybe five hundred times already. But never with me. Never benefitting from my particular slant on mammoths and trilobites and the rest of those failures that they've got on display down there.

Don't bring lunch money. We'll be eating at Wendy's or the Subway Barn, and I'm the one buying.

Don't bring your workpads or notebooks. You won't need them.

But if you would, please ... remember to wear good shoes. Shoes you can walk in. And if it's at all cold outside, please, for god's sake, wear a damned coat ...!

"IT'S BEEN REFUSED," SAYS MS. LINDSTRUM.

"Excuse me?"

"Your proposed field trip. I know the boys were looking forward to it. But what with the latest tragedy, people want to be cautious."

Which tragedy? Houston wonders. In Memphis, five PS's were found dead in a basement, each body savagely mutilated. In Nairobi, a mob killed three more. Or was it the UN's failure to condemn Singapore's new concentration camp that's masquerading as a special school.

"I'm sorry," she offers.

Over the school year, her office has shrunk. Paper files and stacks of forms have gathered, choking the available space into a stale few breaths and two uncomfortable people.

Again, she says, "I am sorry."

"It's all right." His eyes find hers. What worries him most is the way that she blinks now. Blinks and looks past him. "Is it because of that fight? Because John and Mike did fine during the eclipse, and since," he says. Then he tells her, "There won't be any incidents. I can absolutely guarantee it."

She sighs, then says, "No PS-only field trips are being authorized."

"So let me take along one or two of my old students. To beat that rule."

"No," she replies. Too urgently and with a wince cutting into the half-pretty face. Or maybe he's just being paranoid.

Houston offers a shrug of the shoulders. "Are you sure there's nothing we can do?"

"I'm certain," Ms. Lindstrum tells him. "But the four of you could throw a little party for those three periods. Safe in your classroom. In fact, I'll arrange for food and pop to be brought from the cafeteria."

"I guess that would work," Houston tells her. Then he puts on his best smile, saying, "Why don't we? A little celebratory party. Fine."

M

AYBE IT IS SIMPLE PARANOIA.

But a back-of-the-neck feeling has Houston peering over his shoulder. Every public place seems crowded with suspicious strangers, and his little apartment seems full of dark, secretive corners. He finds himself peeking through curtains, watching the empty parking lot below. Three times he runs diagnostic programs on his phone, searching for taps that refuse to

be found. And when he finally manages to convince himself that nothing is wrong, except in his imagination, his old widescreen abruptly stops finding news about the PS's. Instead, it delivers highlights from a teaching conference in Nova Scotia. Which is a signal.

Prearranged, yet surprising.

Long ago, Houston taught the AI that if its security was breached, dump all of the old files and start chasing down a different flavor of news.

He doesn't fix the protocols now.

Instead, he pretends to watch the conferences that are being piped to him, and he runs new diagnostics on the apartment and every appliance.

That night before the school party, someone knocks.

His lover wears nice clothes and a smile, and she says, "Hello," too quickly. She says, "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

She has always, always called before visiting. But not tonight.

Houston says, "No, it's a fine time. Come on in."

She says, "For a little bit. I'm expected back home."

He hasn't seen her for a month. But he doesn't mention it. He sits opposite her and says absolutely nothing, trying to read the pretty face and nervous body, and when she can't tolerate any more silence, she blurts, "Are you all right, Houston?"

"Perfect," he says.

She swallows, as if in pain.

"How about you?" he inquires.

"They know about us." She says it, then gathers herself before admitting, "They came to me. And asked about you."

"Who asked?"

She crosses her arms, then says, "They threatened to tell my husband."

Houston calls the woman's name, then asks, "Was it that bald security man? From district headquarters?"

"One of them was."

"Who else was there?"

She shakes her head. "He didn't give me a name."

"It's nothing," says Houston. And to an astonishing degree, he believes it. "I've had some trouble with one of the parents. I'm certain that she's filed a formal complaint. That's the culprit here."

His lover nods hopefully, staring at the floor.

He tells her, "Everyone's scared that something bad is going to happen here."

"I am," she allows.

"What did they ask?"

"About you," she mutters.

"What did you say?"

"That I know almost nothing about Houston Cross." Eyes lift, fixing squarely on him. "Which is true. All of a sudden, hearing myself say the words, I realized that you're practically a stranger to me."

He says nothing.

At this very late date, what can he say ...?

M

ENTORS ARE REQUIRED TO CHECK IN at the front office.

Houston arrives a few minutes earlier than normal, signing his name at the bottom of a long page and glancing sideways into Ms. Lindstrum's office, catching a glimpse of her grim face as her door swings shut, closed by someone whom he cannot see.

The school's uniformed guard sits nearby, pretending to ignore him.

Which is absolutely ordinary, Houston reminds himself.

The bell rings. Children pour into the hallway, a brink-of-summer fever infecting all of them. Houston beats the boys to the classroom, then waits in front of the door. For an instant, he fears that they're home sick, or Lindstrum has bottled them up. But no, John walks up grinning, Troy at his side. Then Mike is fighting through the bodies, making for his locker ... and Houston tells the others, "Stay with me," and he intercepts Mike, putting a hand on the bony shoulder, saying

to all of them, "Change of plans."

This spring, the school installed a security camera at one end of the hallway.

In the opposite direction, the hallway ends with lockers and a fire door. With the boys following after him, Houston hits the bar, causing the alarm to sound—a grating roar that causes a thousand giddy youngsters to run in circles and laugh wildly.

"Hey!" says Mike. "You did that!"

"No," says Houston. "It's a planned fire drill. Trust me."

Then John asks, "Where are we going? On our field trip?"

"Exactly."

"I don't have my permission slip," Troy complains.

Houston turns and says, "I took care of all that. Hurry. Please."

They climb down a short set of metal stairs, then cut across the school yard. Behind them, mayhem rules. Screaming bodies burst from every door, harried teachers trying to regain some semblance of control. In the distance, sirens sound. As they reach the street, a pair of fire trucks rush past, charging toward the nonexistent blaze. Various cars are parked along the curb. Trying to smile, Houston says, "Guess which one's mine."

John says, "That one," and points at a gaudy red sport's car.

Houston has to ask, "Why?"

"It's a neat car," says the boy. "And you're a neat guy!"

Now he laughs. Despite everything, he suddenly feels giddy as the kids, and nearly happy. With keys in hand, he says, "Sorry. It's the next one."

A little thing. Drab, and brown. Utterly nondescript.

But as the boys climb inside, Mike notices, "It smells new in here."

"It's a rental," Houston admits. His old heap is parked out in front of the school, as usual. He stashed this one last night. "I thought we needed something special today."

"Are we still going to the museum?" Troy asks.

He and John share the back seat.

Houston says, "No, actually. I came up with a different destination."

Mike watches him. Suspicious now.

The boys in back punch each other, and giggle, and John says, "Maybe we could eat first. Mr. Cross?"

"Not yet," Houston tells them.

He drives carefully. Not too fast, or slow. Up to the main arterial, then he heads straight out of town, knowing that Mike will be the first to notice.

"Where?" asks the boy. Not angrily, but ready to be angry, if necessary.

"There's a few acres of native prairie. Not big, but interesting." Houston looks into every mirror, watching the cars behind them.

After a minute, Mike says, "I don't know about this."

"That's right," says Houston. "Be suspicious. Of everything."

The smallest boy shrugs his shoulders and looks straight ahead now.

Houston glances over his shoulder, telling John, "There's a package under you. In brown paper. Can you get that out for me, please?"

"This it?"

"Yeah. Can you open it up, please?"

The boy never hesitates. He tears away the paper, finding a pair of what look like hypodermic needles wrapped in sterile plastic.

"What are these for, Mr. Cross?"

"Tear one of them open. Would you?"

"Just one?"

"Please."

It takes a few moments. The plastic is tough and designed not to be split by accident. While John works, Houston turns to Mike and says, "Be suspicious," again. "When I was your age, I was always suspicious. Suspicion is a real skill, and a blessing. If you use it right."

The boy nods, wearing a perplexed expression.

"Here it is, sir," says John, handing the hypodermic to him.

"Thank you."

"What is it?" asks Troy. "It looks medical."

"It is," Houston admits, removing the plastic cap with his teeth. "People made these things by the millions years ago. If you were poor and gave birth to a mixed race boy, you could test his blood. Like this." He doesn't let himself flinch, punching his own shoulder with the exposed needle. Then he shakes the device for a moment, and shows everyone the dull red glow. "Now unwrap the other one. Yeah. And hand it to me."

John obeys.

In the same smooth motion, Houston jabs Mike in the shoulder. "Sorry," he offers, shaking the second device. Then he puts them together, and with a voice that can't help but break, he says, "Both showing red. See? And what do you think that means?"

12. I USED TO BE PHILLIP STEVENS.

HE SAYS THE WORDS, then sucks in a breath and holds it.

Not one boy makes the tiniest sound.

Finally, laughing uneasily, Houston asks, "What do you think about that? John? Troy? Mike?"

"I don't believe you," Mike growls.

"No?"

"That's a stupid shit thing to say." The boy's anger is rich and easy, bolstered by the beginnings of panic. He takes a gasping breath. Then another. Then he strikes his own thighs with both fists, telling Houston, "He died. The asshole offed himself. Everyone knows that."

Again, silence.

Houston glances at the mirror. The boys in back wear identical expressions. Lost, and desperately sad. Troy sees him watching, then looks back over his shoulder, probably hoping to find help coming to rescue them.

But there isn't another car in sight.

"You two," says Houston. "What do you think?"

"It was Dr. Steven's body," John offers. "That's what the police said."

"The police," Houston points out, "found a body with Phillip's physical features as well as his DNA. But a body isn't the man. And if anyone could have arranged for a bunch of dead meat and organs infused with his own DNA, wasn't it Phillip Stevens?"

"A full-grown clone?" says Mike.

"With a massive head wound. And what the press didn't report—except as wild rumor—were those occasional disparities between the corpse on the table and the fugitive's medical records."

"Like what?" Mike mutters.

"Like scars and stuff?" John asks.

"No, every scar matched. Exactly." Houston nods and pushes on the accelerator, telling them, "But those things would be easy enough to fake. The body was grown in a prototype womb-chamber. The brain was removed early, and intentionally. No pain, no thoughts. Phillip did that work himself. He broke the clone's big left toe, then let it heal. He gave the skin the right patterns of moles and old nicks and such. He even aged the flesh with doses of radiation. And he kept the soulless clone relatively fit through electric isometrics and other rehab tricks."

The only sound is the hum of tires on pavement.

Finally, Mike asks, "So what was wrong with that body?"

"Not enough callus. Not on its fingertips or the bottoms of its feet." Houston nods knowingly, looking across the blurring countryside, then straight ahead. "And even though the brain tissue was scrambled, the FBI found problems. Even with dehydration, there wasn't enough brain present. And what they had in jars didn't have the dendritic interconnections as you'd expect in a mature genius mind."

Again, Troy looks back the way they had come.

Houston turns right on a graveled road, and over the sudden rattling of loose rock, he tells them, "It's not far now."

Even Mike looks sad.

"The original Houston Cross was a loner. No family, and few prospects." Houston says it, then adds, "For a few dollars and a new face, that Houston acquired a new life. And he doesn't even suspect who it is that bought his old one."

John starts to sob loudly enough to be heard.

Mike turns and glares at him. "God, stop it. You baby!"

Over the crest of the hill is a small green sign announcing Natural Area. The tiny parking lot is empty. Which is typical for a weekday, Houston knows.

He pulls in and stops, turning off the engine and pocketing the key.

"All right," he says. "Out."

The boys remain in their seats.

Houston opens his door and stands in the sunshine. "Out," he tells them.

From the back, Troy squeaks, "Are you going to kill us? Mr. Cross?"

The words take him completely by surprise.

He shivers for a moment, then makes himself stop. And he looks in at all of them. And he tells them, "You can't begin to know how much that hurts."

13. WHY DID PHILLIP STEVENS create you?

Any ideas?

Forget my little announcement. My name is Houston Cross, and I want you to explain to me why your father did what he did? Because I know you must have laid awake nights wondering just that ...

THE FOUR OF THEM WALK in single file through the big bluestem prairie, following a narrow path up a hill, both hill and path vanishing in the same step.

Houston stops for a moment, watching the horizon and the rolling windswept land, farm fields on all sides and this little patch of grass and wildflowers tucked into a spare 40 acres. The nearest intelligence is a soaring redtailed hawk. Other than the bird, no one notices

them but them.

Again, he walks.

And he asks the boys, "Why did PS do it?"

"He was selfish," says John. Blurts John.

"Who told you that?" Houston responds. Then he makes himself laugh, adding, "That's right. Everyone says that he was horribly, wickedly selfish. Don't they?"

From behind, Troy asks, "Were you?"

"In a sense. Of course. Who isn't?"

At the base of the hill is a little stand of trees. Ash trees, mostly. With an enormous and stately cottonwood anchoring one end.

"But maybe there's a different answer. A harder, truer one."

"Like what?" asks Mike.

"What's the matter?" Houston asks. "Don't you approve?"

The boy just shakes his head, glowering at the ground.

For the last time, Troy looks over his shoulder. Then Houston places a hand on his shoulder, warning him, "Nobody knows where we are. For a little while, nobody's going to interrupt us. So don't worry. Okay?"

The eyes are wide and sorrowful, but Troy says nothing.

Then they move beneath the trees, out of the wind, their voices carrying and the mood instantly more intimate. More familiar.

Houston says, "There's a third possibility."

"What?" squeaks John.

"That Phillip Stevens remembered his childhood too well. He remembered his loneliness and how very separate he felt from the other kids. A bastard, interracial child without any father ... and maybe all of his plotting and his selfish evil was simply to make certain that the next time around ... that he wouldn't grow up so alone ..."

Now Houston cries.

Sobbing, practically.

Mike is unimpressed. He starts to turn away, announcing, "I don't want to do this shit any more. I'm going back to the car."

"Please don't," Houston pleads. "I want to show you something first. Something important."

Curiosity is the richest, sweetest drug.

One after another, the boys nod in identical fashions and follow, their mentor leading them under the giant cottonwood. Head-high on the trunk is a distinctive X-shaped scar, the thick bark chopped open with a heavy blade. With his back to the scar, Houston starts to count his steps from the trunk. At a dozen, he stops. Kneels. And while tugging at the shade-starved grasses, he tells them, "Always remember. Being smart only means that you make bigger, louder mistakes."

The boys stand as close together as they have ever been.

Watching him.

"With the PS bug," explains Houston, "I assumed that only a few thousand women inside a very limited region would catch it. That's all. A minimal plague and nobody would die ... and when it was otherwise, believe me, there wasn't anyone more surprised than me."

For an instant, Houston wonders if maybe this is the wrong place. Or perhaps he's really Houston Cross, and he is simply delusional. A pure crazy man. But then one tuft of grass gives on the first tug, then lets itself be uprooted with a hard yank. Beneath it is a pipe with a false bottom. He reaches elbow-deep and touches the bottom, the Swiss-made lock recognizing his fingertips.

"I was shocked by the disease's scope," he confesses. "And horrified. And very sorry."

The packets of money are pushed up by a gentle gas-powered piston. Hundred dollar bills create a little wall in the grass, and every boy has to step closer and gawk, Mike saying, "God, that's a lot!"

"A few hundred thousand. That's all."

Troy says, "Shit," under his breath.

The brain was removed early, and intentionally. No pain, no thoughts.

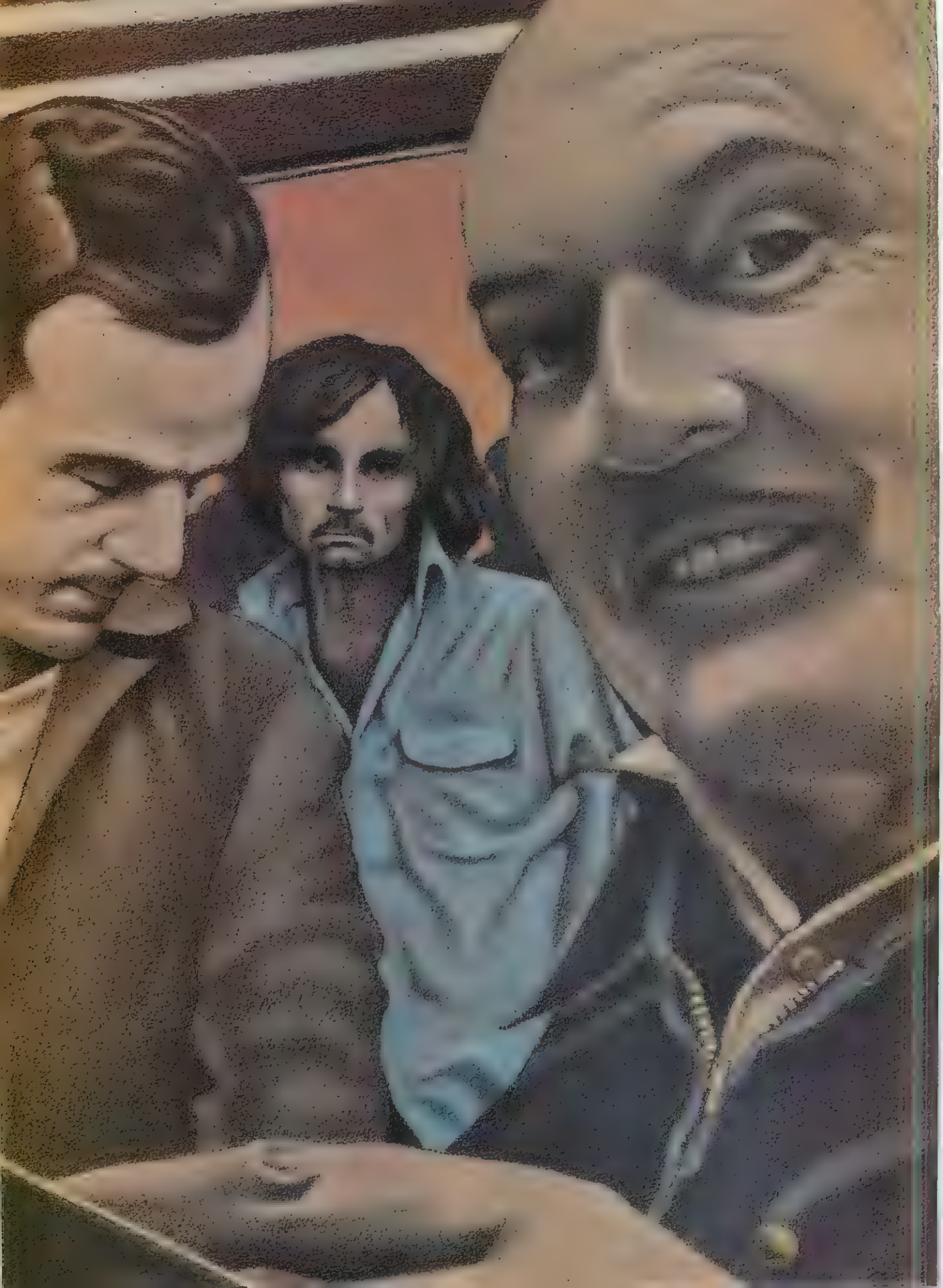
"All of you are Phillip's gift to the world." Houston slows his gait, making sure that everyone can hear. "The man had certain talents that can prosper in any time, and he decided to share those talents with his species. To enrich your generation with his genes, and when you have your own children, then enrich every generation to come."

Mike snorts, in disgust.

The others laugh, for just a moment.

"And this is 20 million dollars," Houston adds, showing them an e-card that couldn't be more nondescript. "Untraceable, in theory. Although I haven't used it in years."

Continued on page 65



“What’s on now?” Carol shrugged, leaned against the wall outside the hucksters’ room to let a knot of people pass, and looked at her pocket program. **“Lunch?”** “‘The Future of SF,’ ‘Politics and Parallel Worlds,’ ‘Jobs in Space,’ or *Moonraker*, she read. Lee grimaced. “Hey, it was filmed on location,” Carol said, blandly.

“Yeah, with centrifugal force provided by Ian Fleming spinning in his grave,” said Lee, who’d hated every Bond film since Connery had quit. “Who’s doing the Parallel World panel? Heinlein?”

“No. H. Beam Piper, L. Neil Smith—”

“Give me Liberty, or give me Lunch!” intoned Lee; both men were fervent Libertarians. “Personally, I’ll take lunch. McDonalds?”

Carol returned the program to her pocket. “Okay, as long as you promise not to run around yelling ‘It’s a cookbook!’ this time.”

Lee grinned. “Promise.” They headed

for the door, but were intercepted halfway across the lobby by a teenaged gopher in a *Battlestar Galactica* jacket and flared jeans. “Lee,” he panted. “The Day Manager wants to see you, she says it’s urgent.”

The grin twisted into a frown. “Did she say what it was about?”

“Something about the signing session for Heinlein,” said the gopher, not quite going into a defensive crouch. “She says there’s someone here from L.A. who might cause trouble.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“I don’t know. All I know is what she told me. Come on.”

Lee glanced at his watch, a cheap digital. “Yeah, okay. I guess there’s no such thing as a free lunch-break.” He turned to Carol. “Are you free for dinner?”

She batted her eyelashes. “No, but I’m inexpensive.”

The grin reappeared. “Great. Be seeing you.”

**Robert Heinlein molded
today’s SF. Charles Manson
hoped to break that mold.**

AMENDMENT

BY STEPHEN DEDMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY CHUCK DEMORAT

Penny, the Day Manager, was a solidly built woman with a *Property of Klingon Rollerball Team* button atop her huge right breast, opposite her name badge. "So this Preacher guy's a big fan of *Stranger in a Strange Land*," Lee repeated, to show he'd been listening. "So're a lot of people; I don't think it's a great book, but that doesn't mean he's crazy."

"It would if he liked *Number of the Beast*," muttered one of the *Illuminati* players behind him. Lee smiled; Penny glared.

"And he's bought a day membership because he wants to meet Heinlein," Lee continued. "So what? What's he done?"

"What *hasn't* he done?" said the Day Manager, heavily. "He's a dooper and a thief and a pimp, and he's spent more time in jail than out, but I'm not worried about that, I'm worried about what he *might* do."

"What might he do?" asked Lee, patiently.

"Anything?" Penny drew a deep breath. "Look, Lee, you don't know this guy. He named one of his kids Valentine Michael. He was thrown out of a con in LA for supplying pot to minors, allegedly in exchange for sex. He used to be a Scientologist, and there are rumors he was a Satanist as well. He ran a nudist commune out in Death Valley, for Christ's sake!" Lee laughed, but turned it into a cough. "Three former members of his harem are in jail for murder!"

Lee raised an eyebrow at that. "Harem?"

She nodded, almost dislodging her glasses. "They stabbed and hacked three people to death and wrote lines from Beatles songs on the walls with their blood. The girls confessed; the DA tried to prove that Preacher was involved and they were protecting him, but there was no hard evidence and he couldn't make it stick, and Preacher just found himself some new women."

"When was this?"

"About 10 years ago. Sixty-nine or '70. It was in all the papers—at least, it was in L.A.," she admitted. "But a lot of witnesses said he was heavily into knives and swords. Throwing them, too."

"Why do they call him Preacher?"

"It's what he calls himself. Sometimes. His women call him Charlie."

"Have you seen him here?"

"Not personally."

"Do you know if he's carrying a knife?"

"No, I *don't* know, but even if he's not, one of his women might be carrying it for him. I'm not expecting him to be violent, but he might ... I don't know ... ask Heinlein what human flesh tastes like, maybe offer to bring him some. Even if all he does is get his women to strip off in the signing session, or ask him to autograph their breasts, Heinlein's 73, something like that could kill him." Lee, who'd lived in New Orleans for nearly half his life, and had briefly worked as a janitor and bouncer in a local burlesque club, swallowed a smile. "They say Preacher once met one of the Beach Boys, kissed his shoes, and ended up taking him for a hundred thousand dollars and some gold LPs," Penny continued. "I'm not asking you to frisk him or anything, just ... keep an eye out for him. Okay?"

Lee shrugged. "Look, this is Texas; it's perfectly legal to carry a knife. And there's a stall in the hucksters' room selling everything from shuriken to bastard swords. But if you want me to shadow this Preacher for the rest of the day, I'll do my best, though you'll need another redshirt for the art show ... What does he look like, anyway?"

She laughed. "That's easy. Very short, not much over five foot. Long hair, beard, and he still dresses like a hippie though he must be pushing 50. There are two ways to find him; one is to stand downwind of him, and the other is to look for all the women. You can't miss 'em."

"Why not?"

"They're a sad fanboy's wet dream," said another of the *Illuminati* players, before Penny could answer. "None of them is exactly what you'd call good looking, but they'll fuck anyone he tells 'em to. Great if you can't afford to be fastidious."

"And your health insurance is paid up," said the first.

"Yeah, there is that. Come on, Orris, are you going to attack or not?"

"Okay," said the third player. "Survivalists, aided by the Society of Assassins, will attempt to control..." He looked at the cards before

him—the C.I.A., *Girlie Magazines*, and the *Secret Masters of Fantasy*—"the C.I.A." Play continued until Lee had walked out of the room, when the first player looked up and asked, "Was that necessary?"

Penny shrugged. "Kills two birds with one stone. I don't want him doing security at the art show; he can be too damn gung-ho, and he's got a temper. But he loves spy stuff, so this keeps him happy as well as busy."

"Unless this Preacher stabs him," Orris muttered.

"Better that than he stabs the Guest of Honor," she said. "Can one of you stop conquering the world for five minutes and put these room changes up?"

Lee found Preacher in the fan lounge, playing steel guitar and singing softly to the three shabbily dressed (and scantily clad for early December, even in Dallas) women clustered around his feet. He was heavily tanned, dressed in an ancient fringed buckskin jacket and much-patched jeans, and while his hair was long and wild and too dirty for Lee to do more than guess the color, his beard was neatly trimmed into an iron-gray goatee.

Two fans were talking in one corner of the room, near the urn. Lee walked across the room, made himself a cup of coffee, and stood where he could watch Preacher while looking as though he were following the conversation; something about the coincidence that Aldous Huxley and C.S. Lewis had died on the same day. Preacher continued to softly wail about Devil's Canyon, but he looked straight at Lee and grinned as he sang. His dark eyes looked like something out of a Lovecraft story, and Lee reluctantly found himself turning away from his gaze. He forced himself to look back. Neither Preacher nor any of his women seemed to be armed, unless there were weapons in the guitar case. He watched as a young woman, a little older than his daughters and much prettier than any of the harem, walked around the cluster to get to the urn; Preacher stopped playing long enough to reach into a pocket and hand her a business card, which she glanced at, then dropped on the table next to the sugar bowl. Lee picked it up as she walked out with a cup of coffee, and pocketed it without reading it. He looked at Preacher, who grinned back.

"Crystal," Preacher said, without looking away from Lee, "go get me a banana smoothie." One of the women—Lee guessed her age at 30—shot to her feet as though goosed and was out the door with a speed that Lee could only admire. "You a cop, man?"

"No," replied Lee, automatically. Preacher's grin widened a little more.

"Yeah, well, if you're after some dope, I'm not holding any, and if you're selling, I don't have any bread, either."

"You came all this way without any money?"

"Just enough for our memberships. The Lord will provide what we need," Preacher replied, and winked. "You from around here?"

Lee nodded. He suspected it would be safer to tell Preacher as little about himself as possible, and it wasn't exactly a lie; he'd lived in Dallas and Fort Worth for several years in the '50s and '60s, though he hadn't been back since his divorce. "You're supposed to wear your badges at all times," he said, feeling like an asshole. One of the women opened her mouth to speak, but Preacher reached into his pocket and removed four badges. Without reading them, he handed two to the women, and clipped a third to his jacket. "Anything to keep the peace, badge man."

Lee glanced at the badge he was wearing; it was yellow, indicating a one-day membership. The only name on it was "Gypsy," while the women's badges—clipped to the waist-bands of their torn-off jeans, just above the crotches—read "Preacher" and "Crystal", but Lee knew that members were free to use any names they chose. "Long way to come for just one day," he said, mildly.

"Yeah, well, we just want to meet Mr. Heinlein." One of the women giggled.

"So do a lot of people," said Lee, softly. "I'd like to meet him myself, but he doesn't have much time. He's not well enough to go to the room parties or anything." He sat on a table near the group; he would

have towered over Preacher even if he'd squatted on the floor, but from that height, it was like staring down into an abyss. "Did you bring a book to autograph, or anything?"

"I thought I might get one here," said Preacher.

"I thought you didn't have any money."

"No." He grinned. "Not right now, but sometimes good people give us money."

"You know he won't sign an autograph unless you can prove you've given blood in the past six months?" Preacher stared at him warily, trying to tell whether he was telling the truth. "He needed a lot of transfusions when he was sick, and he has a rare blood group; he thinks everybody should give blood as often as possible. It was in the progress reports," Lee added, trying not to smile, "and the program book. Look, it may not be too late to get down to the blood bank."

Preacher nodded. "Yeah, well, if Mr. Heinlein wants blood, we got blood." He glanced at one of the women, who instantly sashayed out of the room. His smile said "Your move."

Lee managed not to swear. "Just thought you should know," he said, as blandly as he could manage. "Hate you to be disappointed after coming all this way."

**"Ask Heinlein
what human
flesh tastes
like, maybe
offer to bring
him some."**

Preacher grinned back at him. "Thank you. Anyway, badge man, it's nice talking to you and all, but I've got to go take a piss. You can stay and talk to Gypsy if you want." He stood, and Lee straightened up. The top of Preacher's head was level with his chin, but that didn't make him any less threatening; he was, Lee realized, taller than Attila the Hun, and about the same height as the Marquis de Sade. Preacher weaved past him and headed into the corridor, leaving Lee standing there flat-footed. He mumbled something to Gypsy, then ducked out of the room as she laughed. He watched as Preacher headed for the elevator, then jogged down the stairs to the lobby, emerging in time to see the little man disappearing into the men's room. He walked past the door, and leaned against the wall on the far side, outside the hucksters' room where the signing sessions were being held. He reached into his pocket for his program, and discovered Preacher's business card. "Charles Manson," it read. "President, 3-Star-Enterprises, Nite Club, Radio and TV Productions." No address or phone number. He shrugged, and pocketed it again.

According to the program, Heinlein wasn't going to be making any appearances before the signing at 1600, which was fine by Lee. His years in fandom had taught him that it was often a bad idea to meet

people whose work you admired, and he'd liked a lot of the old man's earlier work, particularly the short stories. He stood there for a minute, watching the door, and noticed Carol walking out of the art show. "Hi, Lee. What did Penny Dreadful want?"

Lee waited until he was near enough to speak to without raising his voice, but was cut off by a shout of "Ozzie?" He turned around, and saw a balding, chunky man in cowboy boots, checked shirt, and too-tight Levis waddling toward him brandishing a clipboard. Lee tried to smile, managing to show his teeth in a narrow grimace. "Hey, Shitbird!" the man called. "Long time no see! How're they hanging?"

"Hi, Dan." Lee had never made friends easily, especially during his days in the Marines, and didn't consider Dan as more than an acquaintance even after a dozen years of meeting at cons. Dan shoved the clipboard at him, peered at Carol's name badge—or stared at her breasts; Lee wasn't sure which—and introduced himself to her. "Anyway, Ozzie, I've got a petition here for you to sign."

Lee sighed inaudibly and took it. "What's it for?"

"Getting rid of some of the pain-in-the-butt red tape you have to go through just to buy or sell a gun, and a couple of other bullshit laws."

Lee laughed softly, and handed it back immediately. "You still flogging this horse?" Dan flushed. "Nah, I think the laws as they stand mostly make sense," Lee continued. "People living in cities don't need guns and most probably shouldn't have them. Look at me, for example."

"Yeah," spat Dan. "I did, and I thought that was a Marine Corps ring you're wearing. I must've been mistaken. Which side're you going to be on if the Russians invade, Oswaldskovich? You still reading Karl Marx?"

"Not lately," replied Lee, neutrally. "And the Russians aren't crazy enough to invade. *Nuke* us, yes, maybe, if Reagan doesn't clever up, but invade?" He shook his head. "Be seeing you, Dan."

Dan turned to Carol. "What about you? With the rising crime rate, women *need* guns, *especially* handguns, and *especially* in the cities."

She shrugged. "Maybe, but how would we stop men getting hold of them? No thanks."

Dan snorted. "Look, if you outlaw guns, only outlaws will carry guns. Prohibition's never worked for drugs, why would it work for weapons? Shit, there must be nearly half a million unregistered guns in the States, guns brought back from World War II or Korea, M-1s, M-2s, M-14s, Thompsons and God knows how many pistols..."

Carol shook her head, and watched him stomp off. Preacher walked out of the men's room an instant later, and Dan wheeled around and offered him the petition. "I take it you voted for King," said Carol, *sotto voce*.

Lee nodded. "Is that a problem?"

"No; so did I. I didn't expect him to win, but I thought it was time for a president who wasn't white. Why did that guy call you, uh..."

"Shitbird?" Lee smiled crookedly. "It was one of my nicknames when I was in the Marines, because I was such a god-awful shot. They also called me Oswaldskovich because I was reading *Das Kapital* and studying Russian. I wanted to get into Intelligence. Actually, I wanted to be Herb Philbrick."

"Who?"

"A spy, on a show called *I Led Three Lives*. It was my favorite TV show when I was a kid, probably before your time; it must have been canceled in '55 or '56. I discovered James Bond a few years later. I even bought myself a little pistol, but the only person I ever shot with that was myself — by accident, of course. It got me busted down to private and three months of K.P. I am possibly the *last* person on Earth who should be trusted with a gun." He glanced at Preacher, as he signed the petition and walked down the corridor chatting to Dan. "One of the last, anyway. I used to be a real hothead. Sure, I was young, which is a pretty good excuse for being an idiot, but not for being an asshole. I used to pick a lot of fights, I even hit my first wife a few times, until she left me. After she and I were divorced, I had a nervous breakdown and ended up in the hospital; God knows what I might have done if I'd had a gun *then*. The thought scares the shit out of me." He drew a deep breath. "But as I said, that was years ago. I like to think I'm a better person now."

"John Lennon has just been stabbed outside his apartment building in New York. He was dead on arrival at the hospital."

She wrapped an arm around his waist. At 35, an assistant librarian at the University of Texas and twice divorced herself, she'd lowered her expectations when it came to meeting men her own age. Lee lived too far away to have much potential as a partner, his sense of humor was unpredictable, and she didn't share his enthusiasm for *The Prisoner*, but he didn't drink, was in good shape for a man of 41, and had been a pretty good friend for several years without ever trying to pressure her into sex. Maybe, she thought, it was time for her to make a move. "We all do stupid things when we're young. Jesus, some of the things I did in my student days.... You still want dinner?"

"Sure, after the signing. Where shall we go?"

She shrugged. "I don't feel like getting dressed up. Why don't we try room service?"

Preacher and his women arrived at the hucksters' room a few minutes after four, by which time the slow-moving line had already extended through the doors and down the corridor almost as far as the lobby. Preacher, Lee noticed, had a new-looking paperback of *Stranger in a Strange Land* in one hand, and the three women were giggling as at some secret joke. Lee stood behind them in line, trying to see what they had in their carry bags, and wishing that someone had given the committee an excuse to call the cops. The line inched forward, and he realized that he was sweating. It took nearly 20 minutes for them to get inside the doors of the hucksters' room, and he was pleased to see another two redshirts flanking the table and that the sword merchant's stall was on the

other side of the room from the line. Without realizing he was doing it, Lee began counting the people between Preacher and Heinlein, counting them off as the line shortened. Twenty ... nineteen ... eighteen.... Dan walked out past him, carrying copies of *Starship Troopers* and *Farnham's Freehold*. Fifteen....

Preacher was four or five yards from the table when Lee heard someone clear their throat from the doorway. He turned around to see Penny standing there, her face red. "If I could have your attention, please," she began. A few people turned around; most—including Preacher—didn't. Eight....

"There was just a news flash on the radio," said Penny. "I checked with the other stations, in case it was a hoax. It isn't. John Lennon...."

Preacher turned around, and everyone fell silent. Lee saw the older man's eyes gleam as Penny continued, nervously but loudly. "John Lennon has just been stabbed outside his apartment building in New York. He was dead on arrival at the hospital."

There was a stunned silence that seemed to last for minutes. Lee stared at Preacher, softly, who had turned stark white. "Come on," said Lee, softly, kindly. "You look like you need to sit down."

"No..." whispered Preacher. He stared at Penny, his eyes seeming to become deeper and darker, and then a buck knife appeared in his empty hand as though by magic. With a scream of rage, he launched himself at Penny. Lee stepped into his path to block him, and Preacher leaped up and slashed at his face. Lee recoiled, stumbling backward, and Preacher weaved around him. Lee spun around to face him and make a grab for the knife, hoping his longer reach would give him an advantage, and felt another blade enter his back and grate against his bottom rib before being withdrawn. Preacher laughed, and Lee stumbled forwards and aimed a kick at his knife hand. Preacher merely dropped the book and caught the knife with his other hand, then leaped back out of Lee's reach. A student tackled him from behind, knocking him down, then two more rushed in to grab his arms. Lee turned around to face the woman who'd stabbed him, and saw all three standing there, knives drawn, looking as though they were waiting for orders. Preacher screamed wordlessly, and the women rushed at Lee, two with their knives held high, one aiming for his belly. They stabbed him 15 times before he blacked out.

He half-woke two days later, seeing only whiteness, feeling as though he was floating. Only the stink of disinfectant and the dry, dead taste in his mouth convinced him that he wasn't in Heaven. He tried to focus, then to sit up. "Take it easy," said a voice from incredibly far away. "Give me a second to call the nurse."

"Where am I?"

"Parkland Hospital." The whiteness became a flat plane, a ceiling. "Don't try to move," said the voice. "You lost a lot of blood; I've seen a few people knifed in my time, but no one with as many holes as you. You're lucky to be alive."

"Are you a doctor?"

A short laugh. "No, but I used to be a cop. Name's Tippit; people call me J.D."

"I'm Lee Oswald. What're you in for?"

"Heart bypass," said Tippit. "I was sitting at home on the weekend, watching the game, and next thing I know they're rushing me into the trauma room."

Lee managed to move his eyes enough to see vases of flowers on the nightstand. "You've had a lot of visitors," said Tippit. "Your lady friend's been here most of the time since you came out of surgery. But they've kept the photographers and reporters out. Everyone's calling you a hero."

Lee shook his head. "All I did was nearly get myself killed."

Tippit laughed. "Well, take it from me, you may's well make the most of it while it lasts. People don't remember heroes very long."

"Yeah," Lee replied, then grinned broadly. "You know," he said, mostly to himself, "I always wanted to be a hero." □

THE CUCKOO'S BOYS

Continued from page 59

"What else is there ...?" one of them asks. He isn't sure who. Bending low, reaching into the damp hole, he tells them, "This. This is what I wanted to show you."

Exactly the size of the piston beneath it, the disc is silvery and outdated by the latest technologies. But it's still readable, and probably will be for a few more years.

John asks, "What's that?"

"When I realized the scope of my plague," says Houston, "I made a nearly full list of the PS's. Birth dates and add-resses and important government IDs. Everything that you would need to make contact with them. In this country, and everywhere else."

"But that's all old now," Mike points out.

"A lot of these boys have already died. You're right." He looks at them, one after another. Then he lets them watch as he shoves the cash back into its hiding place, leaving it unlocked, and fits the hat of sod and grass back into the pipe. "Others have moved. But if you're going to get in touch with them, you'll need to start somewhere."

None of the boys can manage a word, watching him.

Houston flips the disc toward John, then says, "If you need, come get this cash. But only as you need it."

Mike bends and picks up the disk, then asks, "What are we supposed to do? Mr. Whoever-You-Are ...?"

"Dr. Stevens," Troy tells him.

"Organize your brothers. The sooner, the better." Houston stands and pockets the e-cash, then in the gravest voice he can summon, he tells them, "Things are going to get very bad, and probably before you're ready. But I know you. And I don't mean that you're just new incarnations of me. I know you as John and Mike and Troy. Together, you and the other boys are going to survive this mess that I selfishly made for you ..."

Then, he gasps for air.

John asks, "What about you? Can't you stay and help us?"

Mike says, "I don't want him here."

Houston agrees. "I think they already suspect that I'm not Houston Cross. If they find out everything, then things will just be worse for you. Which is why you can't tell a soul about me. Ever."

Only John nods with conviction.

"But I plan to help you," he adds. "Later, when I've settled down again, I'll feed you advice, somehow. And if you need it, more money ..."

For a long moment, no one speaks.

Then finally, with a quiet sorry voice, Houston says, "Five minutes. Give me that much time. Then walk back to the main road and wait until someone comes looking for you."

He turns, taking his first tentative step

toward the car.

"What'll you do now?" asks Mike.

Houston isn't sure. Maybe he should slip into another autographing ... this time with a copy of *The Cuckoo's Boys*, its pages laced with botulin toxins ...

"What you should do," Mike says, "is shoot yourself. For real this time!"

"Don't say that," John warns him.

"Why not?" the smallest boy replies. "He's just a big fuck-up."

Again, the grown man starts to cry.

Troy says, "I had fun this year, Dr. Stevens. I did!"

"Don't say awful things about our father!"

John shouts.

"He's not my father, and I'll say what I goddamn want to!" Mike replies.

"Don't!"

"Oh, fuck you!"

With both hands and a hard deep grunt, John shoves Mike in the chest. The smaller boy stumbles and falls backward into the grass. Then for a moment, he does nothing. He just lays there, his face full of blood and a wild, careless anger. Then with his own grunt, he leaps up and runs, dropping his head as he slams into that big soft body, and both boys are throwing fists and cursing, then kicking each other, ribs bruised and lips bloodied before someone throws his body between them, screaming, "Now stop! Please, please, just grow up!"

For a slippery instant, Mike wishes that it's Houston. Phillip. Whoever that prick is. Just so he can give him a few good smacks now.

But no, it's just Troy. Poor stupid Troy is sobbing, and in his own way, he's furious. Then for some bizarre, twisted reason, Mike finds himself actually sorry that it wasn't the man who stops them. Wiping the gore out of his eyes, the boy looks across the prairie and sees no one. No one. Just the tall grass waving and the empty hillside, and the shit ran away again, and there's nobody else in the world but the three of them.

That's when it starts to sink home.

For all of them.

At long last.

14. THERE'S NO ONE LIKE YOU IN THE WORLD.

People like to say otherwise, but they don't understand. Only people like ourselves understand. Each of us is more different than we are the same, and if you think about it, that's our best hope.

Our only hope, maybe.

For now, that's all we can tell you. But watch your mail, and watch for signs. Someday, sooner than you think, we'll talk again. We'll make our plans then.

For anything and everything, we'll have to be ready.

Sincerely,

THE CUCKOO'S BOYS □

TELEVISION

Continued from page 26

and at the mercy of both sinister government operatives and a mysterious woman. Fox's ace-in-the-hole is *Futurama*, created by *Simpsons* guru Matt Groening. The animated comedy features a 20th-century everyman who escapes his lackluster existence when he finds himself transported 1,000 years into the future. Sadly, the late Phil Hartman was to have played several roles in this series, but the roles will be recast. We'll miss you, Phil.

Syndicated shows continue to thrive. Reruns of *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons*, as well as *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* hit the Top 20, and TNT is to be lauded for giving us *Babylon 5* every weekday. There are also more original shows appearing. One is *Mortal Kombat Krusades*, based on the mega-popular videogame and movies. The one-hour martial arts/fantasy series will debut both on WB and WeB, Warner's new cable web that will serve smaller TV markets starting in the fall of 1998. "We believe *Mortal Kombat Krusades* represents the best in action adventure programming," says New Line Television president Robert Friedman. "The box office success of the feature films is a testament to the enormous popularity of this franchise and we are confident that millions of *Mortal Kombat* fans will embrace the television series when it premieres this fall." The show, which follows the adventures of Kung Lao and his companions as they defend Earth against the forces of Outworld in *Mortal Kombat*—a tournament based on honor and tradition, will be filmed at the Disney/MGM Studios in Orlando as well as at Splendid China, a central Florida attraction that features detailed replicas of China's historic landmarks.

Xena's 3rd season certainly saw a lot happening. Fans watched both Callisto (Hudson Leick) and Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) get killed. It seems pretty sure that Gabby will return in the 4th season (how could she not?), but Callisto, a longtime favorite of many fans, is probably gone for good, since Hudson Leick has expressed an interest in leaving the show for other projects. And if not, well, the old "kill 'em off/bring 'em back" cliff-hanger/season-opener trick is certainly a TV staple. It also looks like the ever-controversial Joxer (Ted Raimi) will have more to do on the show next season (word is he's going to be featured in at least 11 episodes). This has added to the division between fans who like the character and those who don't. Much Internet discussion has centered around Gabrielle's demon-spawn daughter Hope, and how she might figure in Gabby's return, so there's a lot to look forward to in the coming season.

Other shows returning in syndication include *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, *Poltergeist: The Legacy* and *The Outer Limits*. □



THE ELDER GODS WERE AT LAST

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READY TO RETURN, AND IT

SPACE OF TIME

MAGIC, THAT WOULD OPEN THE DOOR.

H

e had said that the geometry of the dream-place he saw was abnormal, non-Euclidean, and loathsomely redolent of spheres and dimensions apart from ours... Parker slipped as the other three were plunging frenziedly over endless vistas of green-crusts to the boat, and Johansen swears he was swallowed up by an angle of masonry which shouldn't have been there; an angle which was acute, but behaved as if it were obtuse.

H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, 1928.

Not long ago I thought I saw my path clear to the highest honours of science; a stinking path, it's true, awash with foulness from the gutters underneath the world, but I maintain that pure knowledge has no stink. *Sciens non olet*. It might have been my motto. Once I was a scientist. Now, though, all the glittering equations have turned to viscid horror...

BY DAVID LANGFORD
Illustration by John Berkey



My name is Dr. Jonathan Lake and my doctorate is in physics, of which I am a full professor with (grimly laughable though it now seems) life tenure; an achievement of note for a man 34 years old. Miskatonic University in the old Massachusetts town of Arkham may not, perhaps, seem the academy of choice for a student of the "new physics." The musty grandeur of its architecture conveys age and eccentric dignity rather than intellectual thrust—which other seat of learning boasts a small, reconstructed Egyptian pyramid in its lesser quadrangle? Indeed Miskatonic has a whispered reputation for esoteric studies verging on the disreputable. What nonsense, well into the second quarter of the 20th century, to maintain a locked library of grimoires and works of cabbalism!

Yet gargoyle-infested Miskatonic University was my own choice: I preferred that my particular lines of research should be undisturbed by the distracting chatter of rival theorists. Here I am pre-eminent—or as my mother chose to write, "You always did like to be a big frog in a small pond, Jonny." (We have never been intellectually close.) There is, additionally, an odd charm in conducting modern experiments concerning the disintegration of matter against a background of hand-crafted brass instruments from the 19th century. Here, even the laboratories are period pieces.

Naturally I have caused new apparatus to be installed and constructed, appropriate for explorations at the outermost frontiers of physics. My strength, though, is for theoretical work: I will be remembered—or should have been remembered—for my correspondence with Otto Stern on the magnetic properties of molecular beams, with the Joliot-Curies on artificial radio-activity, with Messrs. Cockcroft and Walton regarding the theory of the particle accelerator that vulgar newspapers have termed an "atom-smasher," and a dozen other fruitful collaborations. Some far-off colleagues have expressed wonder at the variety of significant papers carrying the grateful citation: "J. Lake, Miskatonic University, private communication, 1932"—or whatever the year might be. How did I contrive to become such a Jack-of-all-trades in so many outlying areas of my chosen field? There have been half-joking suggestions of selling one's soul for the secrets of matter... and indeed less savory hints, not intended for my ears, concerning my notoriously taciturn laboratory assistant. I will speak of him shortly.

The thing began with the dreams. I should never have followed that fascinating path. These were no ordinary dreams; yet paradoxically they *were* ordinary because shared by so many. You will remember the matter; this was in fact the occult *cause célèbre* of the latter 1920s, though to any rational mind it was evident that a few significant facts had been exaggerated by mass hysteria. In particular, the wells were soon tainted by that discredibly sensationalist account of the matter published by Mr. Howard Phillips Lovecraft in 1928: no later report of the dream can be entirely trusted, being so much more likely to stem from this secondary source rather than from... well, what?

I first experienced what have been termed the "Cthulhu dreams" in the early spring of 1925, as I began to settle into my assistant professorship at Miskatonic. The general details have been sufficiently widely published—the vision's invariable setting being a monstrous city built to inhuman proportions and adrip with abyssal sea-ooze, as though thrust up from the sea by some tectonic convulsion. The south Pacific earthquake of February 28, 1925, is of course well documented.

The recurring dream was of stumbling flight through this chaos of titanic blocks, feet forever clogged by weed or *Urschleim* from the depths. Certain aspects of this disagreeable vision I found myself able, with an effort, to dismiss. The pursuit by some absurd tentacled monstrosity cobbled together from children's nightmares could plausibly be interpreted as an imagined response to the grim, monolithic architecture and rotting sea-stench. (I am unable to agree with James Branch Cabell's assertion that smell and taste are never encountered in dreams.) Only later did I formulate the notion that there might be matters too repugnant for mental depiction—concepts that the mind instinctively shrouds in improvised masks of dread. Meanwhile it was the city itself, the drowned city or mausoleum or necropolis, that com-

pelled one's unwilling belief. Somewhere, one felt, this maze of jarring geometries did actually in some sense exist.

If we are to believe the researches of Lovecraft, this city of "R'lyeh" briefly emerged from the waters of the Pacific in March of 1925, to sink again in early April—after the crew of the schooner *Emma* had landed there and experienced terrible things. At this time, once the unstable island had sunk once more, the true dreams (rather than the hysterical contagion that resurged in 1928) ceased... except that mine did not, for I have the unusual though not unknown ability to return to and re-examine the landscapes of dream on successive nights. One can readily train oneself to direct one's dreaming in this fashion. I confess to an intermittent obsession with such quirky side-issues, dreams and chess problems and optical illusions, whose pursuit rather hindered my career until—but I anticipate.

The most extraordinary part of the island story had related that one hapless crew member called Parker was swallowed up by an angle of the city's crazy carvings. It was this that caught my imagination, sustained my interest: for many of the structures in the dream-architecture had just that twisted, perverse quality of optical illusion.

Indeed some recalled the deceitful drawing of a cube that the Swiss savant L.A. Necker described as long ago as the 1830s: an ambiguous outline which abruptly and disconcertingly seems to reverse after being studied for a time, so that the near and far corners exchange places. A small object drawn on one of the near faces—a blob of paint, say, or a resting fly—seems, without moving, to shift instantaneously to the *inside* of the Necker cube. I found myself haunted by an unspeakable vision of the man Parker stumbling, against the jutting angle of that slime-bedecked monolithic structure and, in just such a flicker of perspective, being drawn within as the unstable geometries shifted to take him in a cold embrace of stone.

Time passed. Occasionally, more through idle curiosity than with any set purpose, I traveled in my sleep to that familiar city of dreadful night...

Perhaps it was only an excess of imagination that led me to sense, amid the dream's echoing gibberish of cult phrases like *Cthulhu fhtagn*, the endless frozen scream of seaman Parker in his unnatural bondage outside the space we know. Perhaps it was mere intellectual dilettantism that led me to grope toward him with the aid of a book that I stumbled upon in the year 1928 and now recognize as more grotesque and damnable than any of the *Necronomicons* or forbidden grimoires in Miskatonic University's sealed library. In my irregular dream-visits to the stone labyrinths it seemed logical—by the logic of dream—that if one could visualize the unspeakable rotation of other-dimensioned space that had swallowed Parker, one might mentally follow where he went: and one day on waking I remembered that the "Miscellaneous" bay of our not over-extensive Science Library contained a popular guide to precisely this visualization...

I most earnestly urge any reader of this statement to avoid that dangerously entangling work *The Fourth Dimension* by the mathematician Charles Howard Hinton, M.A., late of Princeton University. The plain red cloth binding and gaily colored frontispiece of the third edition (January 1912) conceal a pathway to madness. Another mathematician, Poincaré, had already remarked: "A man who devoted his life to it could perhaps succeed in picturing to himself a fourth dimension." The italics are mine. Indeed Hinton devoted his life to the imagining of a fourth dimension in space, and tried to spread the contagion to his unknowing readers through his infamous "model" cubes. Twelve of these, elaborately coloured on each face and edge, suggest 12 perspective views of the tesseract, that four-dimensioned shape whose faces are cubes—just as the three-dimensional cube has faces that are squares.

In my folly I made myself a set of Hinton cubes. The basic 12 are

THE THING

I SHOULD NEVER

BEGAN WITH

HAVE FOLLOWED THAT

THE DREAMS.

FASCINATING PATH.

only the beginning: The experimenter must construct three further sets of 27 single-colored cubes. By handling these constantly, memorizing the coloured faces and edges, and imagining their impossible linkage as directed by the color coding... one can eventually develop fleeting, eerie insights into a space where there is not only height and breadth and depth, but a further perpendicular direction that might be called *otherwards*. The cubes dance madly in the mind's eye, like the visual equivalent of a nonsense jingle that runs interminably and unbearably around the ruts of the brain. It is a monstrous imposition on sanity; and it is an intangible piece of scientific apparatus that can be carried into dreams.

Night after night I glided through R'lyeh's stinking canyons of obscenely carved stone, struggling to maintain the lucidity of the city's dream-image while marshaling the Hinton cubes into what I hoped would be a key to its unearthly, eldritch geometry. Time and again the dizzy structures would topple like a stack of child's wooden blocks, casting me back into my austere college bedroom with a jolt as though I had fallen from a certain height, bruised and headache-ridden. Blinking in the feeble glow of the lamp that I keep burning to allow the jotting-down of night thoughts, I would grope for a few hours of normal sleep before duty called me to the faculty's frowsty lecturehall and the exposition of general relativity or the quantum theory to puzzled sophomores...



I was disconcerted when Dr. Henry Armitage, keeper of the famous Library, obliquely asked whether I took an interest in the kind of occult lore of which he was custodian. With a weary chuckle I remarked that physicists had other fish to fry, and that I was grappling with very different matters. But though he is frail and his hair is almost white, his piercing blue eyes seemed to see clean through my airy manner to that inner vision of cyclopean blocks.

"Of late there is a certain look about you which I have met before," he said quietly. "Some matters should not be too closely grappled with. If your work should carry you into the realms of my own expertise, remember that you may come to the Library for advice."

"It's a taxing problem," I admitted, and forced a smile: "But I'm sure that I can give it up any time I wish."

Weeks went by, the daily round and the nightly struggle. The cubes are addictive, their sequences hypnotic; eventually the imagery becomes second nature, ingrained like the multiplication table. Not long after I had reached this instinctive adeptness there came, quite unheralded, the R'lyeh dream in which the brief insight of Hinton's visualization meshed at last with the forms of those terrific slabs and buttresses. After my long dream-quest through the unknown, I had found a viewing stance from which that repellent geometry made a kind of sense.

The effect was indescribable. I seemed to see *around* the complex

outer faces of one damply shining trapezohedron of basalt, and to find myself reaching in the *otherwards* direction past a stone corner that somehow rotated between convex and concave. A dream-sense of enormous error and disaster thrilled through me like a powerful electric discharge. At the fringes of hearing, a thick voice seemed to intone: *Yog-Sothoth knows the gate, for Yog-Sothoth is the gate*. I remember deploring this superstitious intrusion (obviously a fragment of the cult mythology that had lodged in my mind) into an essentially scientific thought-experiment.

It was then that my questing fingers encountered another hand which seized them in an icy, clammy grip.



All of the sudden I was awake. But the gripping hand remained, and the night-light's comforting glow disclosed an image of horror that loomed too close to my face. Not slime or tentacles,

but a long pallid shape resembling a stick of French bread... though with certain disquieting grooves and features. This strange organ's grotesqueness came into focus as unbearable deformity when I recognized it to be a human head, insanely elongated as though stretched out like bread-dough. Later I was to recall a similar shape in Hans Holbein's celebrated painting *The Ambassadors*—a mysterious anamorphic object which, when seen from an acute angle (in particular, by someone ascending a stairway on whose wall the painting would hang), emerges with shocking, foreshortened clarity as a skull.

At the time, my shrieking intellect was incapable of such sober rationalization. Awful perspectives shifted and rotated as the thing that still clung tightly to my hand pulled itself painfully from around the corners outside space, here growing and here shrinking as though in a carnival hall of mirrors, until what subsided on my bedroom floor—amid a low-tide reek from befouled sea boots—was no more than human.

I wrote in my journal for May 8, 1930: *He is human. He is alive*. And scratched out the silly words, for I did not care to think of the alternatives that crowded on me in that insane moment of transition. Perhaps my dream lasted a little longer than I thought, and I took the distortions of nightmare for waking reality—which seemed the sanest intellectual position to adopt, except that I knew it to be untrue. Seaman James Parker, a commonplace fellow with rough dark hair and an untidy beard, who five years ago had sailed from Auckland in the doomed *Emma* and vanished into an incomprehensible geometrical snare on the far side of the world, lay before me with the smell of drowned R'lyeh still on his boots. The gigantic implications of the event were swept aside by practicality; to begin with, I did not care to become another subject of common-room gossip about faculty members who "entertained" unusual guests in their rooms all night.

Arkham Sanitarium lies across the Miskatonic River, eight or nine blocks from the university quadrangle. The hospital is closer, but the Sanitarium more private. I steered my confused and mumbling visitor there (without great difficulty, despite his evidently tough and wiry build) and represented him to be a distant relative in the grip of amnesia. Dr. Houghton, with whom I had some slight acquaintance, was sympathetic. Indeed, though bodily whole, Parker had undoubtedly been changed by his experience. His mind had splintered.

In curious visits to his bedside I came to distinguish three personalities. One was a silent Parker who gazed in numb fear at unseen forms, as a cat seems to watch a very slowly moving ghost. Then there was the remnant of the ordinary seaman, babbling maritime blasphemies, fragmentary recollections of shipmates, and occasional screamed hints of a terror that pursued; his halting enquiries of "Where am I?" and abject requests not to be "sent back" were repeated many times over many days before Dr. Houghton's reassurances had noticeable effect and the horrors seemed to fade from the patient's memory. More rarely heard was a third, delirious voice almost a full octave higher than the commonplace Parker's light baritone—sometimes uttering that hateful cultist jabberwocky of "*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn*" and the like;

sometimes speaking a kind of English with great rapidity.

I jotted down several samples, of which this is one: "*the air the earth the deeps abode of stones abandoned unfinished the skull cold in the great deeps conserved oh Lord the charge no charge whirling the tiny ghost beat her beat her beat outward from the heart there is no charge for admission spin the stones the skull the waves electrum elections energy in the great deeps ...*" There was more, much more, weaving a skein of delirium about pines and tennis and God. It was pitiful.



As I walked back

along Garrison Street to the university, I felt a gray disappointment that a man who had slipped outside the space/time we know

should not have returned with some dread and significant message for the world. But then, could one expect an unlettered sailor to return with tensor equations that might finally prove or disprove the enigma of Einstein's general theory of relativity? Or the puzzle of...

It is from that moment, when I paused in mid-pace under Arkham's lowering and fuliginous sky, that the course of my life was truly set on a primrose path leading ever downward toward flame.

For a cold shock washed over me like the breaking of an icy wave as I recollected one puzzle of physics that in that year of 1930 still tormented greater minds than my own, and which had lately engrossed me. There is a phenomenon known as beta-particle emission—the ejection of an electron from a radioactive atom's core—which bafflingly seemed to violate the law of conservation of energy. "Beat her," the gabbling voice had said, and "outward from the heart," and a word I heard as "admission," and more. I flicked through those jotted notes, now eagerly, and found significant terms dotted through Parker's ravings. Had he somehow been reading my mind?

And then I saw a pattern of concepts that had never yet passed through my own thoughts: "the tiny ghost" and, repeatedly, "no charge." No *electric* charge! If the missing energy that was the riddle of beta-emission were carried off by some unknown, uncharged particle, it would be a tiny ghost indeed—eluding our detectors, slipping through every electrical or magnetic snare we laid for it!

That night, as hard rain lashed against the window, I timorously penned a letter to the great scientist Wolfgang Pauli—who was known to be grappling with this very question. It is not my purpose to write a treatise upon physics; suffice it to say that Pauli, at first distrustful of my forwardness, responded generously. In 1931 he published the notion of the ghost particle with full acknowledgment to myself (my own then-lowly name lacked the authority to push such an audacious notion into print); next year, with Italian jocularly, Enrico Fermi named it the *neutrino* or "little neutral one," and Miskatonic University acknowledged my growing reputation by elevating me to the status of full professor. Already I had made other notable contributions to humanity's understanding of the nucleus, such as setting the English physicist Chadwick on his path to the identification of the neutron in 1932.

My damnable secret was, of course, James Parker. Outwardly he seemed to recover with tolerable swiftness from whatever frightful insult to mind and body he had undergone, but from time to time that other voice with its high-pitched babbling would return. During these episodes his muscles generally became rigid as though in *petit mal* epilepsy, and his normally unremarkable face would fix itself in an expression of sly, bestial cunning; afterward he would recollect nothing. I established the man in an off-campus lodging house and arranged to hire him as laboratory assistant—having worked for a time as engineer's mate, he had some small skill with his hands and in fact proved useful with a soldering iron when we assembled Miskatonic's first experimental particle accelerator. A wire recorder served to capture his oracular utterances, which seemed to emanate from some unspeakable *outside*, and again and again held coded passwords to the locked vaults of matter itself.

But my accursed ambition blinded me to the other hints that grew like poisoned weeds amid those rambling diatribes. I was quick enough to seize on anything that could advance my scientific standing, but never stood back to ponder the insidious overall direction in which these insights tended. Still less did I take more than passing note of the "Cthulhu Mythos" elements in Parker's hypnotized flood of verbiage... the suggestions of sacrifice, of obscene Masters who demanded blood and souls, and who bided their time, awaiting—what?

I am terribly afraid that I may know what.

As the 1930s ground by and distant clouds gathered over Europe, our university was the scene of more than one untoward incident. Whispers of obscure night activity in one locked physics laboratory were easy to dismiss: the now operational particle accelerator would sometimes be left to bombard an experimental target all night long, with an attendant buzz and whine of high-voltage corona discharge. If fugitive shapes were imagined in the quadrangle, and once or twice a disquieting odor—well, even in antique Arkham, student pranks and escapades are not unknown!

More unpleasant was the affair of Prof. Warren Rice's cat, a handsome if overfed ginger tom that was affectionately regarded as a college mascot, often seen passing imperiously across the quadrangle on one or another mysterious errand. Following a hideous, agonized yowling in the small hours, the corpse of this creature was discovered on the sidewalk at West Street and Crane Street, which is overshadowed by the brooding outer wall of that part of our campus containing the departments of Geology, of Mediaeval Metaphysics, and of Physics. Dr. Armitage drew attention to the fact that *intestines* and other inner organs were arranged around the dead cat in a kind of pattern or sigil; yet there was no mark or wound on its body; yet, again, its once ample abdomen seemed hollow and shrunken, skin stretched over bone, as though ...

The whirling extradimensional dance of the Hinton cubes still pursued me on sleepless nights, but like a blind fool I failed to make any of the logical connections that are supposed to be my trade. That day I saw but did not see what might have been odd stains on Parker's laboratory coat: his trance personality had become more voluble and lucid of late—though still less pleasant—and I felt myself upon the brink of great and burning truths. Who would have thought that that infinitesimal point we call the atomic nucleus might be broken into two fragments? We had very nearly laid our hand on the Philosopher's Stone of the old alchemists.



Meanwhile the Arkham Advertiser, starved for local news, had contrived a small campaign against careless driving within the town precincts. Other

cats and dogs, it seemed, had met with unseemly ends, and automobiles were the obvious cause—at least to the newspaper. But in the senior common-room, as we dawdled over our coffee, Dr. Armitage read the latest such news item aloud to Wilmarth (one of the instructors of literature), and in tones surely meant to be overheard added: "Odd that the remnants of these famous highway accidents are found on sidewalks, down narrow alleys or in entranceways rather than on the road. It is a pretty problem in physics."

"I beg your pardon?" I said, caught somewhat off-balance.

Armitage leaned toward me and said irrelevantly, "That man Parker seems fond of taking exercise in the small hours." In quieter tones: "I came across him talking to himself in Pickman Street a night or two ago. It was instructive to listen—Have you thought of replacing him? He is perhaps not best suited to academic life."

"I think of the fellow as a lucky talisman," I answered with some honesty. "There's a touch of the *idiot savant* about him—it stimulates my research."

"Indeed. I noted that his peculiar jumble of muttered parataxis included phrases like this 'nuclear fission' that has you scientists so excited nowadays. But I should inform you that it was the other com-

ponent of that muttering that concerned me more; concerned me deeply. Dr. Lake, may I invite you to visit our celebrated Library?"

The wintry force of Armitage's personality drew me across the quadrangle in his wake, like a hooked fish. Oversized keys were turned in elaborate locks, and a minute or two later I was peering at a great and yellowed volume which to me was wholly unintelligible. I do not read Latin.

Armitage said, chattily, "This is supposedly Olaus Wormius's 17th-century translation from the Arabic of Abdul Alhazred... but the provenance of the *Necronomicon* is a little like that of the *Centuries of Nostradamus*. Many other cooks have added their own ingredients to the broth. Now there is a passage of which I was put in mind, two nights ago... let me see..." He turned the broad pages and eventually indicated one passage with a hesitant finger. "*Yog-Sothoth knows the gate, for Yog-Sothoth is the gate*. Why should that make you jump? It is a routine invocation to the guardian of the portal. But consider what follows—"

What followed was, I privately admitted, extraordinary. Were it not for the refined tones of Dr. Armitage translating at sight from the crabbed Latin, it might have been Parker's own occluded personality that spoke. There were the glints and hints of physics, coded as the alchemists encoded their true philosophical goals. I felt a sudden chill when this centuries-old text prefigured the very words that I had written in a worried letter to the expatriate Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard that morning: "uranium chain reaction." And all these nuggets of sense were intertwined with legends of Great Old Ones who inhabited dimensions outside our space (again I started convulsively) and waited for bloody portals to open so that ultimately they might infuse their madness into this world and, with infinite patience, claim it for their own. Once again I felt poised on the verge of some great synthesizing theory; but it eluded me.

"Fairy tales," I said stoutly when Armitage paused at last. "Goblins to frighten children."

"It is badly written, badly organized," he conceded. "Alhazred was always said to be mad. But *there is something in it*. I myself have seen things that are not in any of your natural philosophy. Be warned that you, here, in the modern era of 1939, are somehow touching on these literally abominable matters. Walk with care."

It was his undeniable frosty sanity that perturbed me more than the actual words. I left in great confusion of mind. Darkness filled the open quadrangle outside; a high wind whipped streamers of cloud across the sky, repeatedly veiling and unveiling the dim, gibbous Moon. For a long time I paced to and fro, wavering between concern over these sinister suggestions and resentment at being preached to in such terms by a mere elderly bibliophile. Could it truly be that all my work had been manipulated and directed through Parker's cryptic oracles? Toward what imaginable goal? And—a question that hitherto repressed, it being the proper concern of mysticism rather than science: If Parker were a channel through which insights flowed to me, what was "putting in" this information at the other end?

The night was bitter cold, and I realized I wore no overcoat; it was too late to be outdoors. I turned... and have wondered whether the world's history might have been set on some other course had I not then noticed, in the college's bleak rows of windows, a dim light where no light should be. It was in Laboratory #2.

From time to time I had left the particle accelerator there to do its tireless work all through the night. Not tonight, however; and I always made very sure the laboratory was securely locked, for several of our bombardment samples were of pure gold or metals still more precious. I strode through the entrance arch. The inner door was indeed immovable. As I felt for the key I was struck by the hideous whimsy that a creature that slithered outside our mere three dimensions would find this door and wall no greater barrier

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than a line drawn on the ground—and for that matter could with equal facility scoop out an animal's entrails while leaving its skin and fur unmarked. Then the heavy door swung open to disclose that scene I have prayed to forget.

The room is dominated by the massive cowlings of the particle accelerator, aimed like a naval gun along the central workbenches and at the far wall. That night its low thrum of power and reek of ozone filled the room... but there was another smell, for upon the floor, neatly laid out on folded sheets from the *Arkham Advertiser*, was just such an intestinal abomination as had flitted through my mind a few seconds past. What I saw there had, I realized, been a raccoon... no, not "had been" but "was", for although the thing seemed partially everted in a mess of warm innards, a pitiful twitching and mewling gave evidence that it still lived.

So much for the lesser horror. Far worse was the figure that writhed and crooned to itself beyond the accelerator—a shape which indeed (for the beam target housing had been deliberately unbolted) seemed to bask and luxuriate in the high-energy particle stream, turning to and fro to savor the pale thread of ionization that should have scorched and wounded. Of course it was Parker, but Parker transformed and still transforming. His eyes were closed; his face wore, in concentrated form, that rictus of animal cunning I knew from his times of oracular delirium, but his body, his body ...

"Oh God," I heard myself whisper as vomit rose in my throat. His shifting torso slithered in an irregular cycle from flesh to writhing redness, a jumble of steaming worms and orifices that flowed liquidly around and away to reveal plain pallid flesh again. Although transfixed by these grisly, eye-deceiving metamorphoses, I had wit enough to make an intuitive connection with the Hinton cubes that still spun all too easily in my mind's eye. The Parker-thing was turning itself in the fourth dimension, lasciviously exposing its inner organs to the hot touch of the beam. Words cannot convey the foulness of the sight.

"*The Masters shall have their sacrifice. The last letter has been sent. The portal shall open, and the many decades of the return shall begin at last. Iä! Yog-Sothoth! Iä! The burning portal, the greatest sacrifice...*"

The crooning tones continued. As a scientist I noted the unusual coherence and the similarities of phrasing to the *Necronomicon*. As a human being, I groped for the nearest weapon against terror—a heavy brass-bound collimating telescope that lay conveniently to hand in a jumble of optical gear. It clinked against a prism, alas, and at once Parker was staring at me.

"The good doctor," he sneered. "The Masters have no further need of you. The path to the great blood sacrifice has been cleared."

I stepped forward with stupid bravado, cheered by the heft of the

Continued on page 95

No matter how fast
or far you travel,
once you get there,
there you are.

THE PRACTICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF INTERSTELLAR PACKET LOSS

BY WILLIAM SHUNN

Fuhrmann closely scans the ragged line of debarking passengers—their befuddled eyes dim with the after-effects of cryosleep, their gaits unsteady in the space station's light gravitational field, their auras betraying forlornness and bewilderment as palpably as gray clouds. As each one passes, a matching name scrolls by at the periphery of Fuhrmann's vision, along with ancillary data such as point of origin, education, and net worth. As always, he marvels at the number of people who arrive at Netherview Station with literally nothing, or less than nothing, and at how far and ill-prepared they have come for the privilege.

Fuhrmann has never traveled outside his home system, and cannot imagine ever doing so.

Abruptly, a blinking name draws his attention. The young man just leaving decontamination looks as lost and helpless as all the rest, but Fuhrmann views him in a different light. Tall, gangly, hands like spatulas, this one projects an innocence that the others do not. He may be confused and out of place, but his eyes still glow with curiosity, his face still radiates wonder. With his mussed hair and puffy eyes, the young man resembles a child who has just awakened. Only his unshaven cheeks and his height spoil the illusion.

Time to spoil more than just the illusion, Fuhrmann thinks. He steps forward.

Cove blinked in the bright light of the arrival lounge, his skin still tingling from the microlasers of the decontamination chamber. After having been herded this way and that with his fellow passengers through doors and tubeways and elevators and processing stations, he found the openness of the lounge disorienting and a little intimidating. What now? There was no obvious place to go, no easy direction to take. He felt like a tiny packet of information spilling out through a rupture in the interstellar communications network, lost and unrecoverable, floating free in space and never to find its way home. Idly he wondered if a redundant copy of himself routed along a different path might eventually reach his destination in his place ...

Whoa, pal! Cove told himself. You're really out there! When you start confusing work metaphors with real life, it's time to come back

to the ground.

He wasn't lost. As far away from home as he was, there was supposed to be someone here to meet him, someone familiar. He glanced around at the thin crowd of travelers in disposable jumpsuits like his, at their greeters clad in unfamiliar clothing and decked out with strange body modifications, and amid all the wonders he searched for a glimpse of any familiar face. He wasn't quite certain whom he should be looking for, but he knew she would be around somewhere. He knew it.

Probably. Possibly.

Cove became aware of a pain in his chest, an ache far deeper and more insidious and basic than any physical complaint could be, like a lost piece of his heart, a missing breath.

Maybe she'd be here, maybe not.

Probably not.

"Miles Covio?" said a voice near his shoulder.

Cove turned, startled, a smile forming on his lips and breaking up again as he realized that the voice belonged to a shaven-headed man in a bright caftan and not to a woman. "Um, yeah?" he said with a vague disquiet. "That's me."

"Wolf Fuhrmann," said the man, raising his hands palms-forward, as if someone were pointing a firearm at him.

Cove stared for a moment, then belatedly realized that he was expected to copy the man's gesture of greeting. "Um, hi."

"I'm with Himmlischen Kurieren," said Fuhrmann. He drew a holographic badge from a pocket of his caftan. "I'll be helping you get all settled and oriented."



PORT 1
PORT 2

WELCOME TO NETHERVIEW
1705 3rd Ave. N. #111
504-233-1111

"Himmlichen Kurieren?" Cove asked, giving the badge a cursory glance. "Oh, wait, Celestial Messengers." His new employers.

Fuhrmann, who came to about the level of Cove's chin, nodded curtly. "Quite so. I must say, this is a true honor. Your doctoral dissertation was transmitted to us when the *Godspeed* entered the system, and it was brilliant, just brilliant. 'Colophon Routing and Redundancy: New Protocols for Interstellar Data Exchange.' Did I get the title right? Very innovative material. I especially liked the section on the practical ramifications of interstellar packet loss. Put a very human face on the whole business." He smiled with what seemed to be an attempt at camaraderie. "You've got 70 years of developments to catch up on, of course—well, twice that, with the travel lag—but you're going to be very, very welcome here. We'll be pleased to put you right to work. Er, Miles? Are you all right?"

Cove shook his head. He had spaced out there for a minute. "I'm sorry. I was expecting..." The hitch in his breath caused his mouth to twist ruefully. "Well, I'm a little thrown, because to be perfectly honest I was expecting someone else."

Fuhrmann cocked his head to one side in a strangely birdlike way, and Cove noticed that the man's eyes did not match in color. The iris of the right eye was bright blue, but the iris of the left glinted like chrome, and the white seemed... well, too white in contrast with the other eye. "I'm not aware of who that could possibly be," said Fuhrmann.

Cove shrugged helplessly, concentrating, and then it came to him. "Helen. Helen Pratt." He shook his head. "I keep losing her name." To say nothing of the memory of her face.

"Temporary dysnomia is a frequent side effect of prolonged cryosleep," said Fuhrmann. "It may be quite disorienting for a while, but should pass in a matter of days. Now, tell me about this woman. Who is she?"

"She... well..." Cove felt his face heat and his lips curve into a smile, which he tried to resist. "She's my friend from Enoch." But saying the words, the ache of his love and the attendant self-consciousness changed to something far more vast, and he comprehended for perhaps the first time the size of the gulf he had crossed. By the time he could ever return to his home planet, more than 150 years would have passed, and everyone he knew would be dead. Seventy light years was not a distance to cross lightly. "She was supposed to be here," he finished quietly.

Fuhrmann regarded Cove for a moment with pursed lips. "Why don't I buy you some coffee, Miles?" he said at last. "You look like you could use some. We can pick up your personal effects in a little while."

The shorter man led Cove through an irisng portal and into a wide corridor walled with white ceramic. The corridor curved upward in the far distance, and lush greenery overflowed planter boxes set into every possible niche. The corridor was not crowded, for which Cove was grateful; he had trouble getting around in the low gravity. It was easier to control his movements here at the outer rim of the station than it was in the weightlessness at the hub where they had docked, but he was still feeling only about half the gees he was used to from Enoch. The slight counterspinward nudge imparted by the rotation of the station didn't help much, either.

Fuhrmann preceded Cove through a doorway in the opposite side of the corridor and into a small but cheery diner set amid a stand of dwarf oaks. The tables and chairs seemed to be made of natural wood

growing out of the floor, and the placemats and napkins resembled woven leaves. Fuhrmann purchased two bulbs of coffee from the autoserve and brought them back to the table where Cove was carefully maneuvering into a seat.

"You can dial up cream on the right side and sweetener on the left," said Fuhrmann, handing one of the bulbs to Cove. "If it's too hot, dial down the temp on the front." He sipped carefully from his own bulb. "Now, tell me, how does a young man from a planet like Enoch come to have a friend waiting for him on Netherview Station?"

"It wasn't for sure," Cove said reflexively.

"Even so."

Cove's gaze wandered to a nearby viewport sealed with superglass, beyond which a field of stars like diamond dust on black velvet swung sedately past. "You know the relocation stipend your company offered? How it was enough for me plus a companion?"

"I do." Fuhrmann appeared to stare at a point in space about half a meter before his face. "But your records were updated shortly before the *Godspeed* docked. Only one passage has been charged—yours."

Cove's flesh felt suddenly twice as heavy as it should. He closed his eyes and released a long, slow breath. "Then she didn't come," he said.

"I don't follow," said Fuhrmann.

Cove leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair. "We were in love," he said. "At least I think I was, and I'm pretty sure she was. We were talking about partnering." He found the nipple on his bulb, took a pull of coffee without really tasting it. "I was in school, studying the Standard Curricula. When the compufessor granted me a master's degree in interstellar data exchange, it also spit out this automatic employment offer from Celestial—uh, from Himmlichen Kurieren. You know—'We've projected thus-and-such a need for researchers with your particular talents on Netherheim over the next two centuries, and we want you to come be a part of it all.'"

Fuhrmann nodded. "It still amazes me that people actually take us up on those offers—how close we come to hitting those projections."

"Yeah." Cove massaged the muscles behind his neck at the base of his skull. "Me, too, now that you mention it." Outside the viewport, the blue-gold limb of Netherheim was just swinging into view. So unlike green Enoch, and yet so oddly similar. "I knew I needed to come to Netherheim for the sake of my work, but it was so hard to ask Helen to come with me, to abandon everything she knew. Still, I couldn't imagine coming without her. Oh, God."

Cove took several breaths and another swallow of coffee. "But even when she agreed," he continued, "it was an almost impossible thing to arrange. Enoch has a lot of trouble sustaining its population, and the emigration laws make it really difficult to leave the planet, particularly if you're a woman. I finally got permission to come, but by the time Helen got permission there was no way

for us to get passage on the same ship. The damn bureaucracy—just one more way the government tried to discourage us from leaving. We could both have waited together for an even later flight, but that might have taken two or three years.

"So we agreed we'd go with what we could get right then. I'd leave on the *Godspeed*, which would be stopping along the way at Aphasia and Barnard's World. Then nine months later, Helen would leave on the *Quicksilver*, which would be stopping just once at Serendipity. Only thanks to the relativistic effects, she'd actually end up beating me here by something like 18 months."

Cove stood abruptly, panicking when his feet left the floor. Fuhrmann shot up to steady him, but Cove moved to the viewport and watched as the planet below swung out of sight. "We shouldn't have done it that way," he said, and the words seemed to come from somewhere far distant. "Whatever we did—either coming here or staying there—we should have done it together. Damn, why was I so stupid?"

By the time
he could
ever return
to his home
planet,
more than
150 years
would have
passed and
everyone he
knew would
be dead.

"You're hardly stupid, Miles," said Fuhrmann, laying a somewhat cold hand on Cove's shoulder. "You're a genius, really. You are."

"Yeah, sure."

"Listen, your work shows a remarkably intuitive understanding of communications protocols, a flair for creative problem-solving—what we like to call an ability to think outside the box—and a ... a rare conversance with some of the less well-known ramifications of subquantum physics. The research teams are already wrangling over who gets first crack at you. You've got algorithmic teams, pure theorists, language deconstructionists, even one team working on faster-than-light communication—" Fuhrmann broke off, smiling with embarrassment. "Sorry if I wax a little overenthusiastic, but I get very excited about the prospects here for someone as smart as you are."

Cove shook his head. His face felt frozen. "Well, I'm at least smart enough to know the smarts we're talking about aren't the kind that are really important. Helen was my touchstone for things like that." A tear formed in the corner of his eye, but without sufficient weight to cause it to fall. He dabbed it with the tip of his finger. "She always told me I was too intelligent for my own good, and not smart enough by half."

"That doesn't sound like such a constructive thing to say to someone."

Heat flared in Cove's chest. "Well, it all depends on who's saying it, and how they're saying it."

Fuhrmann nodded and removed his hand from Cove's shoulder. "You're right. I apologize."

Cove sighed. "Forget it. I don't expect anyone else to understand." He turned back to the viewport. "It's funny, though—I can't imagine her not being with me, and at the same time I can't imagine her ever leaving behind her whole life on Enoch. Which probably only proves her point." He laughed without mirth. "So in the meantime, she decided she really didn't love me enough, or she met someone she liked better, or ... oh, who knows what happened."

"You do realize," said Fuhrmann with a strangely jarring brightness, "that imprecision on extremely long relativistic trips isn't such an unusual thing. It only takes a small variation in the ship's velocity to throw the arrival off by a year or two from our frame of reference, or even more. From the ship's reference frame, they hardly notice the time delta, but we certainly do on this end."

Cove turned his head from the viewport, one eyebrow raised.

"Were you aware that your own flight arrived about six months early?" said Fuhrmann. "Maybe you missed the announcement in all the confusion of reawakening. The point is, relativistic navigation is really as much an art as a science—a little like what you and I do. Schedules don't mean a lot."

"How—how can we find out ... ?"

Fuhrmann cocked his head and pointed at his left eye. "Right here. I just subvocalize my query, and I can pick up the results on my eye. What was the name of her ship again?"

"The *Quicksilver*," said Cove, his excitement mounting. "You can really find out just like that?"

"Just like that." Fuhrmann stared again at the invisible point in front of his face, scowling a bit, but then his expression relaxed. "Well, the *Quicksilver* hasn't been in port here anytime in the last century."

Cove felt both his eyes and his smile widen, and for a moment it seemed that his heart was whole again. "Then—then it's still on its way here."

Fuhrmann nodded. "It certainly looks that way. In fact, it looks as though—oh, dear." His scowl returned, fading to a look of resignation. "Oh, oh, dear."

Fear galvanized Cove's skin. "What? What?"

"Miles, I think you had better sit down."

"No! What?"

Fuhrmann would not meet Cove's gaze. "Miles ... I'm sorry. It seems there's another explanation for the delay. You mentioned the *Quicksilver* being scheduled to stop in the Serendipity system. Well, there's a civil war in progress there. Or at least there was 30 years ago, which is the most recent information we have." He coughed. "When the *Quicksilver* entered the system, it was ambushed by a rebel armada. They apparently mistook it for, er, a troop ship."

Cove stood with his mouth open, while the revolving stars outside seemed to stretch out and spin around him. "What are you saying? Are you saying ... ?"

Fuhrmann's forehead wrinkled. "Er, I'm afraid so. I'm—sorry."

"No! Oh, my God, no!" Cove gripped his head in both hands and turned in a circle, oblivious to the stares of the diner's other patrons. "Was she on it? Oh, God, please tell me she wasn't on it! Please!"

"Miles, I don't know," said Fuhrmann quietly.

Cove seized the shorter man by the front of his tunic. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Just that," Fuhrmann said with only a trace of perturbation. "Miles, the ship didn't have time to check in at Serendipity before it was destroyed. The only copy of the passenger manifest would still be on Enoch, and they won't know to transmit it back here until they've heard about the incident from Serendipity. And since Serendipity is closer to us than it is to them, they won't get the signal on Enoch for another 10 years."

"Oh, God, that's 80 years, at least," Cove said. "And with the likelihood of packet loss along the way..." His voice dropped to a whisper, and darkness crept in at the edges of his vision. "Even if I live past a hundred, I'll probably still never know. Never."

He returned to the table and drifted down into his seat, moving like a fragile leaf in the low gees. Only one thought kept the darkness at bay, though it was several moments before he could articulate it. "Fuhrmann, you said something about research in FTL communication."

Fuhrmann sat down opposite Cove. "That's Dr. Saimamba's team, yes."

"Get me on it."

"Well, I can put in a recommendation . . ."

Cove seized the other man's wrist. "Get me on it."

Fuhrmann indicated his helplessness with a shrug. "I'll see what I can do, but—"

"You promise me," Cove said with grim focus, feeling the darkness contract around him. "If your company wants to keep me here one minute longer, then you promise me now."

Fuhrmann picks up his bulb and finishes his coffee before speaking, the better to conceal the troubling mixture of satisfaction and discomfort he feels. To get the result you want, as he has always believed, you need only present the problem in the correct terms. No falsehoods necessary—only facts, properly ordered.

Not all the facts, either—only the necessary minimum. The fact, for instance, that Kim Saimamba has paid Fuhrmann handsomely to get the kid onto her research team—that's nothing Cove needs to know. Her hunger for a Hawking Prize—similarly irrelevant.

And then there are the disturbing rumors he picks up here and there in the company, rumors conveyed in whispered fits and snatches...

He sets aside the empty bulb, which has completed its job and now rattles as hollowly as Fuhrmann fears he will when he stands up from the table. He takes Cove's hands in his own and gives them a solid squeeze, staring straight into the young man's eyes. "You'll get on that team, Miles," he says, with just the precise degree of solemnity and determination. "I promise you that."

The young man's eyes widen in surprised gratitude, trembling on the verge of dissolution, and Fuhrmann has a moment to wonder how plausible it is that the company has really translated its interest in highly motivated researchers into a galaxy-spanning network of independent saboteurs.

And then Cove's brave front crumbles into keening sobs, and Fuhrmann can only pat the young man's hand to no effect as the grief pours out like a river.

If the rumors are true, he will have many more such scenes to look forward to in the coming years.

Murmuring empty words of comfort, he tries without success to swallow the ashes in his mouth—ashes like the cold remains of a blasted starship. □

—for Amanda

BELOW: Vincent Di Fate's cover for the 1977 Ballantine paperback edition of *The Best of Philip K. Dick* was inspired by a brief scene in the 1936 SF film *Things To Come*.
OPPOSITE: When it came to painting women in distress, Earle K. Bergey had no peer.



WORLDS WITHOUT END O! MAN!

Our dangerous
visionary spotlights
Vincent Di Fate's
shared SF visions.



BY HARLAN
ELLISON

Open covenants, openly
entered into: from where I sit, *Infinite*

Worlds is, in the words of *South Park*'s Eric Cartman, "real sweet." That is to say, it's kickin'. This is a positive critique, and I tell you that from the git-go, because the preamble will tend to drool from the fangs.

If there is an odiousness more hateful than inept, incomplete, ignorant compedia that pass themselves off as *Encyclopedia of...* or *The Compleat...* or *The Big Book of...*, it is the wretched horde of boneheaded parvenus and literary wannabes who review such spaz volumes and declare them "a must-buy for anyone interested in" (your choice: ballet, Mozambique, vapor locks, collectible soap flake cartons, midrash from the original Aramaic, pore patterns in early New England rock walls).



Bad enough that half-correct "dictionaries" and reference volumes recycling the errors contained in earlier assemblages receive uncritical praise from self-appointed authorities who are, at best, the species of creature known as Those Who Never Got the Word; but when the general public is guided by pretentious blather to elevate such crippled scholarship to the status of Accepted Wisdom, then all that proceeds from that point is as truthful, relevant and accurate as a skinhead's *folie à deux* about racial equality.

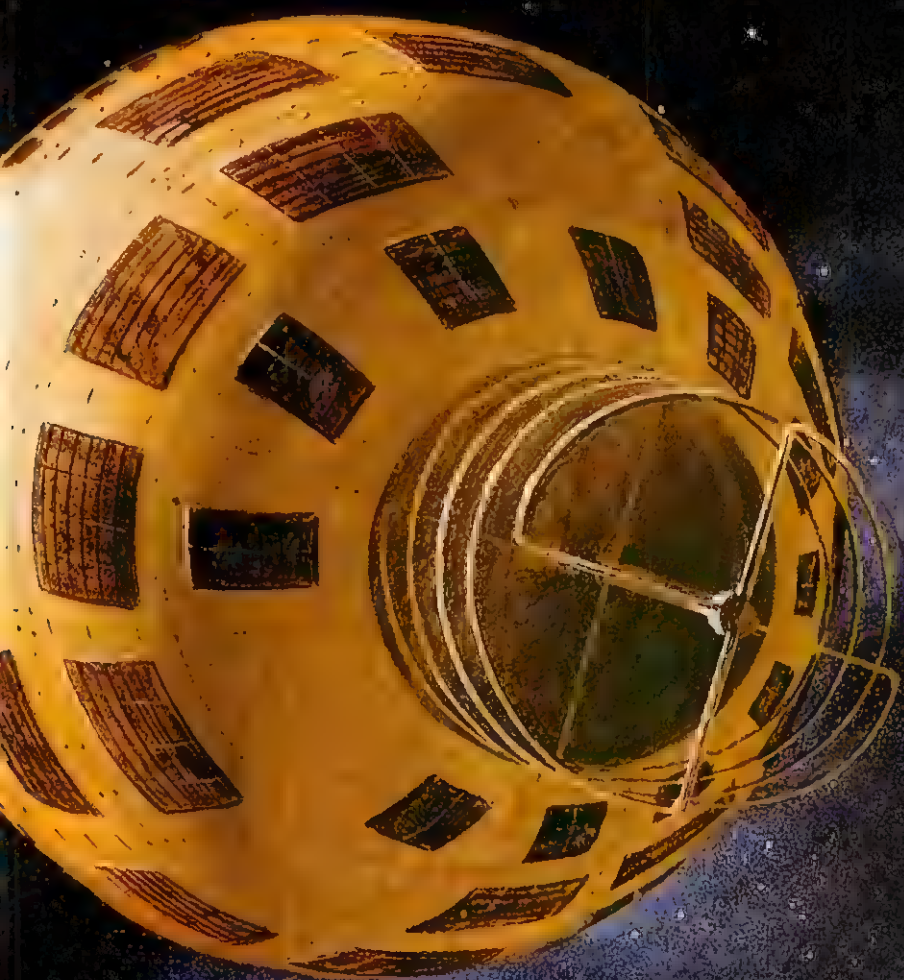
Halliwell's perennial film guides that continue to misattribute the screenplay to *Seven Faces of Dr. Lao* (1964) to the author of the novella, Charles G. Finney, when the scenario was actually written by the great fantasist Charles Beaumont. The slovenly grammarians who use, without thinking, the redundancy "mental telepathy"—that's what telepathy means—mind-to-mind. There ain't no "physical telepathy." Historical texts that continue to call it the battle of

Bunker Hill when it's common knowledge that the fray took place on Breed's Hill. Calling *The Domesday Book* wrongly *The Doomsday Book*. Detective story references that continue to misuse Hammett's "gunsel" to mean pistolero, when anyone who's ever been in the slam knows Hammett was referring to a punk, a catamite. Egregious errors, repeated lemminglike to the edge of the abyss and beyond. As Shakespeare said, "It out-Herod's Herod!"

Bringing us, at last and at full tilt, to Vincent Di Fate's superb assemblage of science fiction artists in something like 700 color and 70 black-and-white illustrations and paintings. A book of uncommon thoroughness and accessibility, each page containing a wonder, a joy, and a delight. Kickin'!

You cannot know what an achievement this book manifests, unless you have been squooshed and flattened by the gaffe-ridden predecessors that have been inflicted on an audience kept mostly ignorant of the charm and exhilaration and brashness of science fiction

OPPOSITE: *Construct of Time* was an early work by Donato Giancola that was a strong indicator of the impressive career to come. BELOW: John Schoenherr's cover art showed a marvelous flair for composition and quiet elegance.





ABOVE: Wayne Barlowe is particularly known for the uniqueness of his alien life-forms. **LEFT:** The surrealist SF of Richard Powers. **RIGHT:** An Alex Schomburg flying saucer lands at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street in midtown Manhattan.

and fantasy art. Before Di Fate's book, nothing worth the gouache to blow it to Hell. With the publication of this volume, an opened door to more and better examinations of a genre snootily unattended. Di Fate has done more than produce a terrifically *lookable* book... he has made an opening statement for a field of attentive study.

But all that said, it's beside the point. It's as jejune and posturing as, say, my friend Tom Disch's review of this book in the *Los Angeles Times* last December. Disch, perhaps unaware of Di Fate's extensive credentials—not the least of which was his stint as President of the American Society of Illustrators, an office not won by pishers—upbraided the author/editor for his failure to posit thematic links between, say, Earle Bergey's cheeky paintings of rosy-hued space-maidens in the clutches of ichor-dripping bug-eyed monsters and Rubens' *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* (1615). Tom, one of the



most mordantly witty and paralyzingly erudite writers in America today, do have a smurph of tendency to take himself and the received universe too seriously. But as Gahan Wilson once said to Sigmund Freud, "Kiddo, sometimes a cartoon is just a cartoon."

So all the academic rodomontade is just so much apple sauce against the blast of inno-

cent wonder to be found in these pages. Comparing Robert Gibson Jones to De Kooning, or Hannes Bok to Maxfield Parrish is not only a mugg's game, it is piecework for pecksniffs. The kind of bullshit game of arrogance played by ribbon clerks who wish they had, for even an instant, *The Vision*.

Continued on page 97

JUST A COUPLE OF SUBVERSIVE ALIEN WARMONGERS FLOATING ALL ALONE IN THE NIGHT

Ottoman 6 was the last, best hope for peace. The notoriously inept Karl Nimmitz changed all that.

IN SPACE, BEING SURROUNDED BY A FLEET OF ENEMY WAR-ships means never having to say you're sorry.

Instead, it means having to say don't hurt me, don't feed me into your nutrient vats, don't lay your eggs in my vital organs, don't stick your probe in my orifices, and especially, don't fondle me with that tentacle, I haven't had my shots.

None of which may be particularly pleasant, but it's all vastly preferable to "Sorry" if "Sorry" is pretty much the only other thing you've been able to say for weeks now.

For instance—just pulling an example out of thin air, you understand—let's say you're the richest, bravest, smartest, and classiest

BY ADAM-TROY CASTRO
Illustration by Joel Naprstek



Joe Mad Bizarro
© 1995

woman in known space. And let's say that several decades ago, when you thought you'd sworn off men forever, you inexplicably fell for and married some sweet dufus who is so, you should only excuse the expression, divorced from any of those qualities that some exobiologists hesitate to classify him as sentient. And let's say that after many, many years of connubial bliss, you all of a sudden can't stomach the carnal act any more because of a certain perverse chain of events that began with him being kidnapped by a giant robot, and ended with you—trust us—giving birth to him nine months later. And let's say he's grown to some semblance of adulthood again and you've taken him on a long cruise through the uncharted star systems on the far side of the K'cenhowten Empire in a desperate—and you've begun to think doomed—attempt to rekindle the romantic spark that once upon a time led to you declaring him your Junior Space Ranger of Love. And let's say said romantic spark has eluded you, and you've both spent most of your subsequent days and nights miserably and awkwardly and inarticulately overapologizing for everything including the mutual ridiculous overabundance of apologies. Thus leading to such undignified circumlocutions as, "I'm sorry, I know you said you were sick of my apologies, and I shouldn't have apologized just then, but I felt I had to apologize for all the apologies I made for the apologies of three apologies ago."

In such a case, says Dear Abby, being surrounded by a fleet of hostile alien warships does at least have the salutatory effect of potentially giving you and your husband something new to talk about.

Still, Dejah Shapiro, ex-wife of the notorious interstellar criminal Ernst Vossoff, current wife of his one-time partner Karl Nimnitz, could have thought of better ways of bringing the spice back into her love life.

The threatening face on the viewscreen looked harmless enough, as grimly visaged alien commanders go ... which is to say it was relatively humanoid, possessed only the most rudimentary fangs, was colored a pretty and not-at-all-nauseating shade of green, and flaunted none of the trendy barbed vampiric cilia that so many of the younger races seemed to rely upon to make their first impression these days. The fact that the owner of that face, Commodore S'Clri of the space station *Ottoman 6*, had just demanded her surrender if she failed to surrender within two minutes meant little to her, for Dejah believed in faces, and this was not a face capable of blowing her to smithereens prematurely.

She glanced over at her husband—whose own face was a completely hairless monument to incomprehension in all its myriad forms—and said: "Think, Karl, think. Have you ever, at any point in your travels, run into this species before? Can you come up with any reason why they'd imagine you a dangerous subversive notorious for crimes against the state?"

Karl Nimnitz regarded the alien with the wounded dignity of a second-grader singled out by bullies in the schoolyard. "I dunno. Maybe it's something they ate. I always hallucinate after pastrami."

"You're always turned on after pastrami."

He shrugged. "Well, I hallucinate after something. If it's not pastrami, it's some other popular deli meat."

Since one of the many drawbacks of marriage to Karl Nimnitz was following his logic, Dejah actually wasted precious microseconds seriously considering the possibility that the alien armada had been driven mad by cold cuts. She shook her head to summon her temporarily missing IQ points back from the farthest reaches of her frontal lobes, winced as her neurons slipped back into position, wondered not for the first time in the past few weeks just what she was thinking when she'd fallen so madly in love with this man, and said: "What about those early years before we met? When you were part-

nered with my ex-husband, Ernst Vossoff? The two of you were fairly dangerous criminals, way back when."

"No, we weren't," said Nimnitz.

"Well, yeah, you weren't. But you tried."

"Ernst tried," said Nimnitz. "I just kept shaking my head and saying, I don't like this."

Which so closely resembled the carnal interludes in her marriage to Ernst that she had to shake her head again, to jettison the unwanted flashback. She pleaded: "But were any of your schemes political, my darling? Did you ever do anything to undermine a rightful government? Did you ever make speeches, print leaflets, draw caricatures, spout statistics, shout slogans, form conspiracies, form splinter groups within those conspiracies, assassinate the leaders of other conspiracies, recruit revolutionary armies, or march on capitals? Did you ever, even once, find yourself exiled to a cold and isolated planetoid with no companions save your small but loyal cadre of dedicated followers, with whom you spent day after day crocheting your flag into throw rugs while endlessly, endlessly dreaming of the day, sooner than anybody dared suspect, when the South, or whatever it was you called yourselves, would rise again?"

Nimnitz boggled. "I've never even registered to vote."

Dejah nodded without surprise. Of course not. There wouldn't have been any point, Karl Nimnitz being the kind of guy whose main reason for never entering a polling booth would have been the nigh-certainty of not being able to find his way back out. She chewed on her lower lip for a second or two, gaining both confidence and competence from the trace amounts of the IQ stimulant she applied with every morning's lip gloss, and then thoughtfully instructed the ship's hytex to contact Commodore S'Clri. "Question," she said. "What do you intend on doing with my husband once you've got him? Torture? Brain-rinse? Execution?"

Commodore S'Clri looked shocked. "You must think us barbarians."

"I guess I'm just a silly goose that way. Bristling arrays of weaponry tend to give me that kind of impression."

"It shouldn't," Commodore S'Clri said sternly. "We're not motivated by revenge, only by our deep-rooted concern about all the subversive influences that threaten the universe at large. Which is why we plan to detain you both on *Ottoman 6*, where you'll have every chance to defend your husband against these charges—if you can."

Dejah and Nimnitz looked at each other.

Dejah said: "I don't know, Karl. I get the feeling these people set new standards for paranoia."

Nimnitz said: "Oh, good. I love Italian food."

OTTOMAN 6 TURNED OUT TO BE ONE of those old-fashioned cylindrical space stations so hopelessly out of date that they need to spin to produce gravity. Dejah had been on one of those once, as a young girl; but that one was a theme park called "Frontierland," where employees dressed as pioneers entertained the tourists by demonstrating the old, back-to-basics skills like patching hull breaches with dead bodies and creating random mutations with radiation leaks. By comparison, the builders of *Ottoman 6* didn't seem to realize how ridiculously quaint it looked. The station was 10 kilometers long, and constructed along lines that seemed to indicate a pathetic attempt at grandeur, even though to her eyes it resembled nothing more than a giant steel cigarette with gun ports.

According to her sensors it was home to half a million humans and aliens, floating all alone in the night. Terrific. The thought of that many people living in something so tacky gave her a migraine she could feel in her teeth.

However, it did appear to be thriving; even as she and Nimnitz

I always
hallucinate
after pastrami.

emerged from their space yacht into the dim light and recycled air of station customs, she spotted representatives of over 50 different species, at least half of which she actually recognized and one or two of which she genuinely respected. She saw a pair of sway-backed Riirgaans struggling to unload a gigantic crate while a vendor of used anti-gravity luggage-handling equipment tried to sell them a slightly bruised box-lightener; a Coriggian pickpocket being swatted away from the facial pouches of a fat marsupial from Durgiss IX; a lone human in black pants and gold velour pullover desperately serenading the crowd with what had to be the absolute worst rendition of a classical Beatles song in the history of music. It was pandemonium, but organized pandemonium, and it would have induced her to upgrade her estimation of this place two entire classifications were it not for the flickering overhead lights that instead made her wonder how come people smart enough to develop space travel were so rarely smart enough to change lightbulbs.

As expected, an ostentatiously armed security force was in place to greet them. Their leader resembled a julienne carrot with tentacles and male-pattern baldness; although his physiognomy was in no way humanoid, he must have had some traffic with humanity at one time or another, since he wore the tattered remains of a Space Patrol dress uniform, complete with empty arm-sleeves. And although his species did not possess legs, he did make a concession to the rules of human military bearing by producing a pair of shoes from his pocket and smartly clicking the heels together. "Welcome to *Ottoman 6*!" he barked. "I am the Security Chief, Mokyl Bariguldi. Which one of you is the male of your species?"

Nimmitz nudged Dejah. "Don't prompt me. I've been studying up on this one!"

Bariguldi blinked several times before turning his attention to Dejah. "Forgive me. This may be a rude question, but I sometimes have trouble keeping track of such things. Was that truly as stupid as it seemed?"

Dejah's sigh was not exasperation, but genuine affection. "I'm afraid so."

"Astonishing. How did you ever achieve space flight?"

"Pure chance," Dejah lied. "Our distant ancestors tried to toss a salad during a Labor Day picnic, and accidentally developed a warp drive based on the unstable placement of croutons."

Bariguldi nodded as if that made literal sense. "I see.—So, to repeat: Which one of you is the male?"

Nimmitz checked under his waistband. "Me."

"Then you're the human Karl Nimmitz?"

"What other versions have you found?" asked Nimmitz.

All intelligent species in the universe are subject to migraines, and for the past century or so, a disproportionate percentage of migraines have been suffered by those who tried to get a straightforward answer out of Karl Nimmitz. Bariguldi was no exception. When the vein in his forehead ceased throbbing, he said: "Mr. Nimmitz, you have been identified by an unimpeachable source as being one of the secret leaders of the Phantoms, an ancient and evil race intent on subverting all that is good and decent in the universe. Now, call us old-fashioned, no-fun, stick-in-the-mud fuddy-duddies if you will, but we simply don't approve of that sort of thing around these parts. I have been ordered to place you in a holding cell under heavy guard, while escorting your mate here to the ruling council where she can hear the specifics of the charges levied against you. You can go peacefully or you go dead. It's up to you. Any questions?"

"Yeah," said Nimmitz. "What are those choices again?"

THE RULING COUNCIL OF *OTTOMAN 6* TURNED OUT TO COMPRISE FOUR creatures of differing species. The first was Commodore S'Clri himself, who sat at the head of the table, resplendent in a uniform of sequined overalls and slowly rotating bowtie; the second resembled a reptilian lemur with an attitude; the third, she initially mistook for a coffee stain that the custodial staff had somehow forgotten to mop up. Dejah was most interested in the fourth ambassador, who would have looked almost exactly like a human woman, but for bald pate and the 13-meter-tall pillar of gnarled bone that jutted upward from

the top of her head. Whenever that ambassador nodded, everybody else in the room flinched, for fear of being impaled.

As Dejah took her seat, Commodore S'Clri took great care to introduce himself and the others. He was the ambassador from the Bursteenii Republic. The lemur with the attitude, who had a name best pronounced by strumming one's throat while burping, was the ambassador from the Eternal Holy Empire of the Gaaaaaaaaaaaa. The coffee stain was Ambassador Sanka of the Dikaiffinates. The lady with the bone was the ambassador from Hoccch-ptui, and her name was Linda.

It was a good thing Dejah wasn't drinking water, because she would have committed a truly spectacular spit-take. "Linda? Did I actually hear you say your name was Linda?"

"Yes you did. Is there a problem?"

"Not much of one," Dejah admitted. "It's just that ... well, it's not the kind of name I'd expect from an alien ambassador 50 light years from the nearest human colony."

"Are you saying that your species uses the name Linda too?"

"Yes. I am."

Linda considered that. "What a remarkable coincidence. Your language and ours must use a largely congruent assortment of phonemes. In such a case, it would not be totally unheard-of for parallel development to bring about the occasional, albeit totally irrelevant, evolution of identical words."

"But Linda, of all things—"

"Don't read too much into it. After all, it's only the shortened version of my full caste designation, which happens to be Linda Schwartz. And fascinating as such discussions of nomenclature may be, we really ought to be talking about your husband's pivotal role in the far-reaching conspiracy against all that is good and decent."

"I suppose you're right," said Dejah. "Because frankly, I'd like to know where you got the idea that my husband plays a pivotal role in anything. I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm madly in love with the man. Have been since the day I met him. He's a sweetheart. A genuine 11. But I can't countenance villainy on a galactic scale on the part of a guy who not too long ago spent the better part of breakfast trapped with his lower lip stuck inside a toaster. The last time a telepath tried to read his mind, its own brain was blown out by the vacuum. If you really believe he's dangerous, you're either the most incompetent bunch of loonies I've ever met—and considering the man I was married to before this one, that's saying a lot—or this is nothing more than a shakedown for a bribe."

"We're not interested in your bribes," said Commodore S'Clri. "We don't even recognize your currency."

"Not even this?" Dejah flashed a wad of billion-credit notes.

"What's that?"

"Billion-credit notes!"

"Sorry. I didn't recognize them."

"I own stock in just about every financial institution in the universe," Dejah persisted. "Adjusting the credits to the proper standard won't take more than five minutes by hytex. How much do you want? Five billion? Ten?"

"I appreciate the offer," Commodore S'clri said, "but I'm afraid we're dead serious about this one. We have every reason to believe that your husband isn't the blathering idiot he pretends to be, but instead a ruthless and wily agent of the ancient and evil race that's been responsible for everything bad that's ever happened to everybody since the dawn of time."

"I know you don't know humans very well, but the expression on my face is called *aghast*."

"Is that what you call it? A ghost? That little pointy thing between your eyes is a ghost?"

"Not exactly," said Dejah. "That's a nose. Aghast is ..."

"Well, whatever. We honestly believe that you don't know the true extent of your husband's villainy, but no doubt you'll feel differently once we explain it to you as it was explained to us."

"I doubt it," said Dejah, "but I'm willing to listen."

"There's a race out there, older than the stars ..."

"Unlikely so far. No stars, no planets. No organic molecules, no

place to evolve. But please continue. I find this fascinating."

Commodore S'Clri frowned in irritation, and started over. "There's a race out there, older than the stars, blacker than the darkest night ..."

"Not just unlikely but inherently nonsensical. Go ahead."

The members of the ruling council traded looks of aggrieved consternation until Linda leaned forward and said: "You know, it's going to be hard enough sharing all of this lengthy exposition without you sitting there making fun of every other sentence."

"Deal with it," Dejah said genially.

"Very well. The Phantoms are so far ahead of us that to them we resemble the lowly amoeba, and yet they hate us with every fiber of their beings ..."

"Which sounds good," Dejah agreed, "until you realize how petty they'd have to be to hate amoebas."

Once again the ruling council displayed massive frustration. The lemur thing puffed out its cheeks to some four times their original radius and asked, "Are you like this all the time?"

"Only when I'm listening to stories that don't make sense."

"Be that as it may," Commodore S'Clri said sternly, "I would prefer that you withhold your withering critical analysis until after I've finished, or I'll never get through this."

"Very well," said Dejah. "Go ahead."

"Ahem. The Phantoms, as we call them, are the most mysterious and the most evil race that ever lived. Nobody has ever seen one; nobody has ever discovered where they're from. All we know is that they move silently and invisibly, leaving no physical evidence but the subtle havoc they leave in their wake." He paused in mid-story, and peered at Dejah. "You're biting your lip. Is there any significance to that?"

"Yes. It's something my people do to avoid laughing out loud."

"In any event, when the Phantoms last struck openly, sometime before the dawn of recorded history, the only thing that prevented them from bulldozing the entire universe and erecting a parking lot in its place was the stalwart opposition of their ancestral enemies, the Strazins, who got all the other indigenous races of the time to put aside all their centuries of hatred and distrust—"

"And sing *Kumbaya*," Dejah suggested.

"—and unite to drive the loathesome Phantoms back to whatever hellish spawning pit they called home. It was a long-fought battle, that succeeded only because the Strazins were there to guide the forces of goodness, and when it achieved great and glorious victory, the result was a shining new era of peace and brotherhood that lasted at least six months before the surviving allies went to war to determine just who among them was going to pay the bills for all this. By which point the Strazins had departed, to some unspecified destination beyond the stars. And in the eons that followed, all records of the Phantoms and the war to defeat them faded into the sands of prehistory ... forever lost, forever forgotten ... with neither the Phantoms nor their ancient enemies the Strazins ever seen again ... until now."

"Dum de dum dum!" hummed Dejah. "Dum de dum dum ... DUM!"

"Yes," Commodore S'Clri managed, "it was the last surviving Strazin ... a being so ancient and venerable and so wise that our people have wittily nicknamed him the Ancient Venerable Wise Being. He is Lord Vostoi, last of the Strazins, and he traveled here, to this space station, to this station of commerce and diplomacy, to this last best hope for peace, to teach us the old histories ... remind us of those old forgotten days ... and warn us that the Phantoms were back."

When Ambassador Linda nodded, her 13-meter tall pillar of bone seemed dangerously close to toppling. "He is the one who told us that your husband was their leader."

"So," Dejah said, "let's summarize, only without the purple prose. You've gathered together to fight a phantom race that none of you has ever seen, that until recently none of you has ever heard about, that left absolutely no physical evidence of its existence, that doesn't even have a forwarding address, or I'd wager a two-line listing in the Official Galactic Registry of Genocidal Warmongers Looking For Work, that you only know about because you were told about them by some other guy you know nothing about who just happened to show up one day with some war stories. This is the evidence that's led you to declare my husband, a sweet guy and a phenomenal lover but as a

threat about as formidable as pollen, the hidden mastermind behind this glorified rumor. Am I more or less correct about this?"

"Well, put like that," Linda conceded, "it does sound pretty flimsy. But we don't tell it as persuasively as the Ancient Wise One does. Talk to him, why don't you. Then come back here and we'll talk further."

"Fair enough," said Dejah. "What's his address?"

THE STRAZIN LIVED IN A SPECIALLY SHIELDED CHAMBER IN A SECTION of *Ottoman 6* primarily inhabited by the wealthy; that section wholly identical to the sections primarily inhabited by the poor, save for the porcelain lawn jockeys that stood guard outside the sliding doors to each airtight compartment.

It allowed her in only as far as the first airlock, then wafted in on a pillar of blinding light, casting little rainbow reflections in all directions, which would have looked impressive if it hadn't made the lighting look like some cheap backwater disco.

Strange dischordant music accompanied its approach, in a manner that reminded Dejah of a spastic and inebriated orchestra absent-mindedly tuning up the wrong end of their wind horns; there was no discernible tune or melody, but if you had no discernible sense of rhythm you could dance to it. The music did not seem to be coming from the Strazin itself—which appeared to be a seven-foot-tall, rotating egg—so much as from somewhere inside her own head. That meant it had to be either some kind of advanced psionic communication system, or a harmonic wave front that made her pick up ancient radio broadcasts on her tooth fillings. Either way it deserved to be respected ... and for the very first time it occurred to Dejah that it just might know what it was talking about.

When it spoke, its voice possessed the distorted, underwater quality of a Universal Translating System straining to express thoughts too alien for Dejah's human mind to parse. Based on the phraseology it came up with, Dejah had to assume that the device was working at the absolute limits of its capabilities.

◇ *Hello there, cutie* ◇

She was unruffled. "Hello there, eggman. I'm the walrus."

I am Lord Vostoi of the Strazin ◇ We are the Protectors ◇ We fought the Phantoms at the beginning of time ◇ We beat their ectoplasmic butts ◇ We can do it again ◇ Rah rah sis boom bah ◇

Dejah said: "Brave sentiments coming from a giant egg."

◇ *This is not an egg ◇ This is my life-support capsule ◇ My encounter suit, if you will ◇ I wear it to protect me from the ravages of this atmosphere ◇ And to hide my true appearance ◇ For if any of you were to cast your eyes upon me ◇ It would drive you mad ◇ Mad ◇ Mad I tell you ◇ Mad ◇*

"Well, from what I can see, you've already been showing your face to too many people around here, because a bigger group of loonietunes I never saw."

◇ *Insane times require insane people ◇ just as stupid times require stupid people ◇ and annoying times require annoying people ◇ and flatulent times ◇ ... well perhaps it's best that we not get into that ◇ either way it is the principal lesson of history ◇ next to the folly of thinking you won't have Nixon to kick around any more ◇ In any event, this space station ◇ and these people ◇ are the last hope of the cosmos ◇ The war for survival will be fought here ◇*

"The war against what? These phantom whatchamacallits?"

◇ *Yes ◇ The Phantom Whatchamacallits ◇ Though we usually just call them the Phantoms ◇ The Phantom Whatchamacallits being too unwieldy a phrase ◇ It doesn't roll lightly off the tongue ◇ even of those species that evolve tongues in the first place ◇ In any event ◇ They are preparing a new offensive ◇ a new war against all other life in the universe ◇ and they must be stopped ◇ starting with your husband ◇*

"Funny you should bring them up, buddy. It's precisely what I want to talk to you about."

◇ *Your husband Karl Nimmitz is not what he seems ◇ He cannot be ◇ No one man can be that stupid ◇ He is the secret leader of the Phantoms ◇*

"That's ridiculous," Dejah said. "What proof do you have?"

◊ *I am a billion years old and I live in an egg* ◊ *Would I do this at my age if it wasn't true?* ◊ *Think, Dejah* ◊ *Think* ◊ *You are the smartest, wealthiest, and most powerful woman in the known galaxy* ◊ *You embody excellence in all its forms* ◊ *You are the apex of human achievement* ◊ *You are the ideal toward which all members of your species strive* ◊ *Now think about your husband and the impression he gives visiting dignitaries when he accidentally swallows the silverware* ◊ *Why would a woman like you love a man like him?* ◊ *Is it sensible for you to be married to a man whose favorite indoor sport is pushing all the buttons in elevators?* ◊ *Or are you being controlled by the Phantoms?* ◊ *Is this all just a plot to lull you into complacency as he affects your industries, undermines your defenses, and makes you less than you can be?* ◊

For most of her marriage, Dejah would have been able to come up with some brilliant response to that. Today it took her several seconds just to recover. "It's ... love! There's never any explanation for love! You should see who my Aunt Cathy married! She was a galactically renowned concert violinist, he was an unshaven slob who wore dirty T-shirts and picked his feet in finer restaurants! It didn't mean he was some kind of evil alien invader!"

The Strazin hovered gravely. ◊ As a matter of fact, it does ◊ We know of your step-uncle ◊ His name was Oscar Kruger ◊ and among those who truly see the structure of the universe ◊ he was known as the Reaver of Worlds ◊

"Oh, I refuse to listen to this! Uncle OSCAR? An old guy with cigar breath and a pot belly? A guy whose biggest crime in life was wearing mismatched bunny slippers? Who are you trying to fool?"

◊ In your heart of hearts, you know this is true ◊ He was the Reaver of Worlds ◊ and your husband Karl Nimmitz is the Ravager of Stars ◊ He must be placed on trial for his crimes against intelligent life ◊ He must be forced to tell what he knows ◊ And you must cease your futile efforts to defend him ◊

"I can't do that! He's my husband!"

The Strazin turned its eggy back and floated back into the mists from whence it came. ◊ *Whatever* ◊

It was a significantly shaken Dejah Shapiro who made her way to the internment compound of *Ottoman 6*. The sudden nagging doubts had left her a pale shadow of her former self; indeed, the strain evident on her face had in the past half-hour alone caused her to slip from Most Beautiful Woman In the Galaxy all the way down to Number Seven. The deterioration was not yet visible to the naked eye, and indeed would have been almost impossible to discern with state-of-the-art instruments, but Dejah was aware of it—and she didn't like the rate at which she could feel herself plummeting toward that humiliating eighth slot.

Even so, she didn't look even remotely as disturbed as security chief Mokyl Bariguldi, who sat holding his head in the spongelike appendages he possessed instead of hands.

"What's wrong?" asked Dejah.

There were several false starts before Bariguldi managed to find his voice. "I was just interrogating your husband."

"And?"

"I can't stand his non sequiturs!" Bariguldi wailed. "My head's exploding!"

Forget Number Eight. Dejah felt herself wither all the way down to Number 12. "Can I speak with him, please?"

Unable to face the thought of facing the captive Nimmitz again, Bariguldi whimpered, attempted to rise, failed, and then, defeated, pressed a button on his control panel. A doorway appeared on the far wall. Dejah thanked him, and walked through, wishing this were one of those hi-tech jails where it was possible to literally check one's migraine at the door.

As it turned out, the jail was so very low-tech that it actually had solid cell doors, with barred windows at visitor-height. This was a minor strike against the credibility of *Ottoman 6*. Most jail cells in the galaxy had open doorways equipped with teleportation grids that transported would-be escapees the exceedingly short distance back to the rear of their cells. This was a horrendously expensive system, of course, but it did possess the virtue of being horrendously frustrating—so much so that some prisoners develop a pathological hatred of doorways and actually refuse to leave their cells when their sentences are done. Jail cells with solid doors just didn't possess the same rehabilitative properties. Still, if her husband had to be in jail, she was glad to find him in the old-fashioned kind; knowing him, he would have exhausted himself walking through that door all day long, day after day, thinking only that he was trapped in some very long, very pointless, and very redundantly decorated corridor.

IF, she reminded herself, he was indeed the Karl Nimmitz she thought she knew ...

As she approached his cell, he popped up in the window, gripping the steel bars in his hammy fists. "Dejah!"

She touched his hand protectively. "Karl. How are you holding up in there?"

"I don't like it, Dejah. It reminds me too much of jail."

"It is jail," she reminded him.

"Oh. Then it reminds me too much of school."

She massaged her temples with her fingers, suddenly understanding precisely how poor Bariguldi felt. "Karl ... I've been talking to the people who run this place ... and they've been telling me some very disturbing things."

"Like what?"

"Well, for instance ... just picking one example at random ... totally off the top of my head, you understand ... they say you're the secret leader of the Phantoms, an ancient and evil race bent on universal conquest. What do you think of that, Karl?"

Nimmitz boggled. "What do you mean, what do I think of that?"

"I mean, what do you think of that?"

"What do YOU think of that?" he demanded.

"I asked you first."

"I know. I'm still wondering why you asked."

"Because," she said patiently, "I wanted to know what YOU thought."

"I can't tell you."

"And why not?"

"Because I've forgotten what we were talking about."

The throb between her temples grew louder. She passed 50 on the beauty scale, while still accelerating downward. "Well, Karl ... it's not like we've had the most normal marriage."

"What do you mean?"

Dejah bit her lip, wondering how best to put this. "Don't take this the wrong way, my darling ... but most wives who genuinely love their husbands have some vague idea why. They can cite their mate's handsome features, or his tremendous courage, or his depth of character, or his brilliant wit, or his sense of style, or, failing all that, the occasional harder-to-define something that they can find nowhere else. You, on the other hand—while you may be a sweet guy—have the manners of a hamburger roll, the sophistication of a pickle slice, and the conversational skill of a large order of fries. We may have a Happy Meal, but I just can't see the nutritional value."

"Isn't it printed on the side of the carton?"

"I used to think it was the maternal quality in me," said Dejah. "After all, when I met you, you were partnered with my ex-husband, and in dire need of rescuing. The part of me that remembered being married

We beat their
ectoplasmic
butts!

to him identified with that. So I fell in love with you, practically at first sight. But I shouldn't still feel that way, after decades of watching you get your nose caught in elevator doors, should I? Especially not after having to give birth to your mitochondrially induced clone!"

He gripped the bars more tightly. "What are you saying?"

"That if you ARE the secret leader of an ancient race bent on universal conquest, then you probably have resources greater than those you allow anybody to see. You probably want to be married to me because of my wealth and influence, and you probably know subtle mind-control techniques designed to keep me devoted to you, despite what should now be incredible dissatisfaction with the state of our relationship. Is that possible, Karl? Is it?"

Nimmitz said: "I don't know. I guess. If it is I sure don't know about it. I just thought you liked calling me your Junior Space Ranger. I sure liked hearing you say it. —Who the hell made up that stuff, anyway?"

"Some guy dressed like an egg."

"I don't usually listen to guys dressed like eggs. There's no telling where they've been. Have you known this guy long?"

"No. Just met him. His name's Lord Vostoi, last of the Strazins."

"Lord what?"

"Vostoi. V-O-S ..." She closed her mouth, and remained silent for a full five seconds. "Why, that miserable bastard."

THERE ARE, IN THE UNIVERSE, ONLY THREE FORCES THAT cannot be resisted, that cannot be fought, and cannot be denied.

One of those is entropy.

Another is the mysterious binding force known only as Fhahr, which makes The Other Line move faster than The One You're On.

The third is Dejah Shapiro when she's truly and irrevocably pissed off.

The inhabitants of *Ottoman 6* got their first taste of that when she barrelled out of the security corridor with all the speed and determination of a Batrilsian Rhino in full charge. Even the aliens that had never seen a human face before, and therefore had no otherwise explicable way of interpreting her expression as that of A Woman Whose Way You Most Definitely Do Not Want to Block, scurried for cover; and when a security guard attempted to block her entrance to the diplomatic wing she merely snarled and flicked him over the railing and onto the crowd below with the most disdainful twitch of her perfectly sculpted fingernail.

She caught up with Lord Vostoi at the convenience store where two of the corridors branched, wholly gratified to catch him in the act of buying toothpaste, beef jerky, and the latest issue of *VIL-LAINY TODAY*.

It was hard to tell through the egg, but he may have blanched when he saw the expression on her face. ♦ Uh Oh ♦

She grabbed the egg with both hands and, putting her weight into it, spun it as fast as she could. That was pretty darn fast: The murkily translated speech being broadcast from inside took on a distinctively nauseated quality: ♦ Stop ♦ Don't Do This ♦ We Can Still Make a Deal ♦ You Don't Know What Kind of Business Opportunity This Is ♦ These Pathetic Chumps Will Believe Anything ♦

She reached out and clapped a Shapiro Industries pocket vibrational resonance bomb to the spinning egg. The armless Vostoi, who could not remove it any other way, zipped over to the far end of the store and attempted to scrape it off against the Automatic Teller, but by then the hairline cracks on his outer shell had already begun to spread, in an explosive lightning-pattern that stopped only when the egg exploded, littering the overpriced canned goods with shrapnel.

The figure that fell from the egg was not a wise and ancient elder of the universe. It wasn't even a newborn baby chick.

It was Ernst Vossoff—notorious interstellar criminal, ex-partner of Karl Nimmitz, and ex-husband of Dejah Shapiro.

Dejah went off. "You cad! You dirtbag! You scuzzbucket! You no-neck geek! You monument to entropy! You sack of neutronic phlogiston! You slimy anti-phylogenetic reverse-evolution crud! You malfunctioning anti-gravity commode! You fault-line in the tectonic plate of life! You previously undiscovered and completely useless subatomic particle! You free-flying cloud of intestinal vapor! You-not-very-interesting conversationalist! You cosmic redundancy! You living disproof of the kindness of God! You excrement of the Lovecraftian elder Gods! You—"

"Excuse me," said the proprietor of the convenience store. "This is a family establishment. I'm afraid we can't have—"

"EXPEL IT OUT YOUR THIRD EYE, BLUESKIN! CALL STATION SECURITY IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT! IN FACT, ACTIVATE YOUR CAMERAS AND SEND THE HYTEX FEED TO BARIGULDI! I WANT HIM TO SEE THIS ANYWAY!"

Vossoff tried to pull a concealed weapon from his belt. Dejah recognized it as a Bettelhine Munitions sonic grenade and batted it away with a single flick of her hand. It went off near the porno magazines, filling the room with confetti-sized pictures of alien invertebrates doing obscene things in vacuum chambers. Vossoff reached for another weapon. Dejah reached down, seized one

end of his giant walrus mustache in each hand, and yanked his helpless flailing form off the floor. All the WAY off the floor, so his feet kicked and flailed above the deckplate: Dejah being not only a tall girl, but a remarkably fit one.

Dejah being not only a tall girl, but a remarkably fit one.

"You almost had me," she snarled.

"Incorporating my Uncle Oscar in your cock-and-bull story—that was brilliant. I couldn't imagine any other way an enigmatic billion-year-old alien would even know who my Uncle Oscar was, so it made the whole scenario almost believable. I never even considered the possibility that I was speaking to somebody who'd actually MET my Uncle Oscar!"

Dangled from the hair on his upper lip, Vossoff was helpless to do anything but cringe. "Dejah

... my one true love ... I don't mean to criticize ... but this isn't exactly the most ... pleasant ... sensation ... I've ever had. Would you please ...?"

"Ernst, if you don't confess everything right now, and I mean the instant I lower you to the deck, I will introduce your sorry behind to three hundred and fifty-six sensations that make this little exercise in excruciating agony look like a backrub."

His eyes widened. "Three ... hundred ... and fifty-six?"

"Starting with creative uses for that can opener over there."

"Interesting," he managed, in the last gasp of his defiance. "I wouldn't ... have been able ... to come up with ... more than ... two hundred and twenty."

She introduced him to number 53. He wheezed and said: "Fascinating ... I wouldn't ... have thought of ... THAT one ... in a million years ..."

"Will you confess?"

"... absolutely ..."

Hating the civilized instincts that required her to show mercy, Dejah reluctantly lowered him to the deck. "Now, talk. What are you doing here? Last we heard of you, 20 years ago, you and two other equally reprehensible pieces of space-vermin had been reduced to submicroscopic size and imprisoned inside some space-man's liver!"

Vossoff massaged his sore lip. "Indeed. And a more pointlessly

we're playing
barbarian
and geisha.

dreary place I've never known—even Fyliss IV and New Pylthothus, nightmarish as they were, had their share of gothic panache. Fortunately, about six standard years ago, when that particular diminutive, and I should add, thanks to your neolithic husband, totally fingerless body of mine was finally murdered at the hands of my fellow submicroscopic castaways, the mitochondria responsible for our plight took pity on my helplessness and reincarnated me as the parasitic twin attached to the back of an Arc-turian hippo. I spent another two months staring up the sky as my host grazed amid the tall grass of the savannah, and I'd be there still had the beast not been shot by some big-game hunter either too moral or too aesthetically picky to mount me on the wall with the rest of his hard-won trophy. After the surgery, I made my way to New Vegas, where I—hey! HEY! Stop that! That hurts!"

Dejah put him down again. "Now tell me what you're doing here." "Isn't it obvious?" Vossoff sneered. "Some people will listen to any line of paranoid conspiracy bullshit as long as it comes from a mysterious enigmatic figure in an all-concealing encounter suit. Admittedly, not MANY people—you have no idea how many space colonies sent me packing before I finally ran into one inhabited by a sufficiently gullible pack of rubes. But once that happened, my future fortunes were assured."

"But the Phantoms, Ernst? The Phantoms!?!?"

"Why not? It's a perfectly good story. I didn't even make it up; I just appropriated it from some broken-down, liver-spotted, wild-haired old rummy who I heard using it to cadge free drinks in a spaceport bar. He claimed it was true, too, but didn't have enough imagination to exploit it properly, like I did. And corny or not, you can't argue with my results. I've been skimming 10 percent off the top of this place's operating expenses for the better part of two standard years now, and until you came along, was well on my way to becoming the wealthiest sentient in this sector."

"Which would have been enough for you," Dejah said, "if we hadn't passed through the celestial neighborhood, activating your burning thirst for revenge against me and Karl."

"Oh, sure. That goes without saying. Making you doubt him—~~and~~ precipitating what is probably the inevitable decline of your marriage to that inane cretin—was worth it all by itself. But that wasn't all I was after. I planned to milk that beetle-brained bozo's trial for all it was worth—bilking you for court costs and legal fees, selling rights to the htex feed to the media conglomerates of 10 thousand different planets, engaging lawyers and legal experts to endlessly discuss the case on talk shows, starting an entire branch of the interstellar publishing industry just to churn out book after book on the proceedings, introducing months on meaningless side-controversies just to keep it going. The way I figured it, I would have surpassed you in wealth in about a year."

"Assuming you managed to drag out such a farcical trial for a year."

"Why not?" Vossoff said. "Your celebrated ancestor did."

That did it. Dejah Shapiro was about to introduce her hated ex-husband to each and every agonizing sensation she could think of, when all of a sudden a soft hand grabbed her wrist from behind. She whirled, expecting an attack—and saw instead the calm but sheepish face of Ambassador Linda Schwartz, who she almost didn't recognize because her bald pate and her 12-meter-tall pillar of gnarled bone had somehow been replaced by a much more attractive, and probably much more manageable, darling pageboy-do.

"Men," Linda sympathized.

"Uh ... yeah. Say, didn't you used to have a 13-meter tall pillar of bone protruding from the top of your head?"

Linda nodded gravely. "Yes."

"I knew it looked ridiculous, but I just assumed it was normal for your species."

Linda cried out in scandalized amazement. "THAT thing? Heavens, no! That would be horrible!"

"What happened to it, then?"

"It went away," said Linda.

IT WAS SOMETIME LATER. THE TIDAL WAVE OF APOLOGIES AND VICTORY

parties now finally over and done with, and Commodore S'Clri's offer of free *Ottoman 6* snow-globes, teddy bears, and souvenir T-shirts politely declined, Dejah Shapiro and her husband Karl Nimmitz hurried back into their space-yacht to take their leave. They did not dawdle leaving *Ottoman 6* space-dock; indeed, once they were out in open space, Dejah paused just long enough to take a last fond look at their old friend Ernst Vossoff, who was working off his massive debt by polishing the giant space station's outer hull. As *Ottoman 6* was a big place, and he'd only been given a supply of toothbrushes to work with, he'd probably be performing this community service for a long, long time. But that was okay: As he'd been sealed inside a tamper-proof vacuum suit with an infinitely recycling supply of food, water, and air, he wouldn't want to prolong that time with unnecessary rest and recreation. Commodore S'Clri estimated that even at 10 hours a day, it would probably take him 40 standard years to polish the entire hull from end to end—by which point, with any luck, even he might think twice about ever again giving advice while dressed like an egg.

Dejah, who sat behind the controls, watched Vossoff work for all of 30 seconds before the space-suited figure abruptly stood up and waved his fist at her. Sound didn't have to travel in space for her to imagine she heard that familiar gravelly voice screaming at her in Slavic. She considered calling Karl to take a look, but decided against it—Nimmitz still didn't know his old partner was behind all this, and if he found out he'd probably insist on attempting a rescue.

That was one good thing about her husband, anyway: He certainly was loyal.

Loyal ...

She was misting up, imagining herself unobserved, when her husband's voice startled her from behind. "Why are you crying, Dejah?"

She hurriedly blanked the viewscreen, so he wouldn't spot Vossoff. "Because I'm sad."

"Why sad?" he asked, as he sat in the empty seat beside her. "You took care of everything, just like you always do."

"Because I lost faith in you. Because we once had something so perfect and because it's been so long since it was perfect and because for a few short hours they actually made me think you were secretly the devious megalomaniacal leader of an ancient alien species plotting universal domination. I can't imagine you ever forgiving me."

"You can't?" said Nimmitz. "Really?"

"Of course not! You must be furious at me!"

"No, I'm not," he said. "I'm flattered."

Stunned, she looked at his utterly guileless eyes, and for just 10 seconds wondered if the story of the Phantoms could be true after all. It could be, after all; as Ernst himself admitted, he hadn't made it up himself, but only plagiarized it from some old guy he'd encountered in a bar. And when all was said and done, it was just as reasonable to believe her husband a mind-controlling mastermind, forcing her to love him against her will, as it was to think that a woman like her could spend the days and nights of her life head-over heels gaga with Karl the hulking vessel for a single-digit IQ. Thanks to Vossoff—who'd finally succeeded in something for the first time in his long and misbegotten life—part of her would never be sure which scenario was the right one. All she knew was that there was only one way to banish the doubts.

She smiled, once again The Most Beautiful Woman In the Galaxy. "I know it's been a while, honey, but as soon as I set course corrections, we're playing barbarian and geisha."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

Nimmitz hooted. "Oh boy! My favorite! Props!"

WHICH WAS ALMOST, BUT NOT QUITE, THE END OF IT.

Because that night, after she fell asleep thinking, It's all Right, It's Over, He's No Devious Alien Mastermind, He's Just Karl, after all ...

Nimmitz waited until he was absolutely certain she was unconscious. Then he rose, padded to the control room, warmed up the communications console, and sent the secret coded message to his fellow conspirators at their next scheduled port of call ...

TO BE CONTINUED! □

By Eric T. Baker

A unique gaming company deciphers *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.



The distant station from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (above) and the Norfolk offices of Decipher Inc.'s headquarters (right) are both central locations in the SF universe.

SO WHY A CARD GAME? MORE, WHY A collectable card game? If you wanted to play a game set in Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* universe, why would you want to play a collectable card game and not something more traditional? Like perhaps *Monopoly* with *Star Trek* locations and characters on the board? For Bill Martinson, one of the designers of Decipher Inc.'s brand-new *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Collectable Card Game*, the answer is the chance to tell stories.

"With the cards, we're giving each player the tools they need to build their own episodes of the series." Like a TV episode, the goal of the game is to bring together the proper resources to solve the evening's problems. Each player lays out missions, then complications for his opponent. From their hands, each player then alternates drawing and playing cards, building and equipping the away teams they need to complete the missions and overcome the complications. "With just a few cards you can make some crazy stories." Like a party of Ferengi commanded by the resurrected Commander Scotty. At the same time, nothing happens outside the established precedent of the mythos. Bill says, "We try to make the game mirror what you see on the show."

There is another big reason for "Why a card game?" It has to do with the "collectable" part. Carol Wisely, Decipher's vice-president of marketing, points out that a big percentage of the games' customer base is collectors.

"Lots of people buy our decks who never play the game. They're fans who appreciate the art and background that goes into our cards." Designer Sandy Wible says, "The cards help bring out things that are only in the background in the episodes. Like the insignia for the Tal Shiar and the Obsidian Order [the Romulan and Cardassian Secret Police, respectively]. It's in the shows, but it's on a wall or uniform and you can't really see it. The first clear pictures you get of them are on our cards." The quality of the card art is so good that other toy makers call Decipher to get reference material for their own products.

Decipher's offices are located in downtown Norfolk, Va. They are in a neighborhood familiar to a lot of downtowns, with broken-in storefronts right next to brand-new construction, and quick marts proudly displaying "Checks Cashed Here" signs right next to upscale restaurants. Company owner and president Warren Holland owns the three-story building where Decipher is located. The outside is completely nondescript, with only a tiny sign identifying the company headquarters. The



inside has much more personality, having been razed and rebuilt from scratch. A staircase that winds around the elevator shaft dominates the atrium just beyond the front door. In the basement Web/computer support room, employees sit in wire cage chairs in front of computers on wrought iron stands. There is not a cubicle wall to be seen. The lighting is subdued and indirect; the bathroom has mirrored walls. You feel more like you've walked into a modern art gallery than a gaming headquarters.

The two most lucrative franchises in science fiction are *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Decipher has licenses to make games in both universes. They have done card games for the original *Star Wars* movies and for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. They will be creating games for the *Star Wars* prequels, and right now they are doing *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. "It's exciting to be doing a product for a line that is current," says Carol. "Many of our customers are young enough that they have only seen *The Next Generation* in reruns. Now they can get the cards for a show that is still on the air."

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For anyone interested in running a tournament, participating in one, or simply donating to the cause, please visit Decipher's web site at www.decipher.com, or call Kendrick Summers at (757) 664 1143 for details. At the request of the Valdez family, all entry fees and donations collected will be contributed to the Child Cancer Fund in Jacksonville, Florida.

* Shawn Valdez is known throughout the *Star Wars* CCG community as a real life hero. Battling leukemia for over 8 years, this amazing 13 year-old lived each day with the courage of a Rebel trooper. In August of 1996, Shawn passed away, but his determination, courage and strength continue to inspire the *Star Wars* CCG player community.



Decipher's new release will be in the quality tradition of their well-received *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (left) and *Star Wars* (below) collectible card games.

they found more than enough characters were there for them. Bill says, "When we were doing the Ferengi for *The Next Generation* decks, we were surprised to find that there were 40 Ferengi characters in the seven-year run, and 28 of them had speaking parts." It was the same with the Cardassians and the Bajorans.

"It might be nice to just make up anything you want," Bill says about creating cards, "but having the constraints often makes your work better. You have to try harder to make your game work with what you have available."

The constraints show up in game play too, lending to situations that will be familiar from the show. For instance, the Federation, by its nature, will not attack another affiliation without major provocation. The Bajorans, on the other hand, will attack the Cardassians over the slightest provocation. When Federation and Bajoran characters are assigned to solve a mission together, the Bajorans suddenly have to take on the Federation values about when force is the appropriate answer. Or else the Federation may have to look the other way while the Bajorans employ more direct means.

The process of creating the cards for the games involves cooperation and consensus between the designers and the art department. Game designer Tim Elington describes the process: "We get a concept for a card, and we go to the art department. They tell us what they have. Sometimes they have a better idea, or they have an image they want to use. We go back and forth until it's right." Some images are easy, and some hard, but not always in the ways you would expect.

One ship that will be on display in the *ST: DS9* game is the *New Orleans*. This class of Federation ship has never appeared intact on-screen. A heavily damaged *New Orleans* is

"Each week we watch the show and see something new we'd like to put in the game," Bill says. "Oooh, a Romulan shuttle craft that cloaks. Can we put that in?"

Back in 1994, right at the birth of the collectable card game industry, Decipher already had a relationship with Paramount. Decipher made (and still makes) traditional family games like the popular *How to Host a Murder* series. At that time, they had a license to produce a *Star Trek* board game. Because of that license, the original designers of the *ST:TNG CCG* came to Decipher. Four years, many expansion sets, and a few special collections later, the game is only getting more popular.

The *Deep Space Nine* game will not be a simple expansion of *The Next Generation* Game. It will be a new game with its own starter packs that can be played by itself. None of the previous *TNG* cards will be needed to play, but the *DS9* cards don't make the *TNG* cards obsolete. "You can use the *DS9* cards with the *TNG* game, and you can use the *TNG* cards with the *DS9* game," Bill says with deserved pride. "We felt like the producers of the *Star Trek* shows when they sat down to create *Deep Space Nine* originally. They already had *The Next Generation* and they wanted something similar, but also new. We wanted to keep the flavor of *The Next Generation* game, but make it better too."

"*The Next Generation* was a very proactive show. They went out and did things. *Deep Space Nine* is more reactive. Things came to them. Still, *Deep Space Nine* is a mission-solving game."

Maybe the most obvious change from the original game to the *DS9* one is that some of the missions will take place at interior locations on the station. Up to now, all the action has been out in space, on various planets and outposts. Now Bashir's infirmary is going to be as much a setting for stories as Vulcan or Bajor.

In both games, the decks are built around affiliations. In the *TNG*, it was the Federation,

the Klingons, and recently the Borg. The *DS9* game will be built around the Bajorans and the Cardassians. Hints of the Dominion will be contained in the cards, but they don't yet have affiliation status.

"The game is set before the Dominion appeared," Bill says. "We wanted to get all the basics, then we'll add in. For now Odo is the only shape-shifter." And the war with the Klingons? "We're not sure yet. You don't need a lot of cards to do a war because it is just the cards you already have being used in a different way."

One of the neat things about the game is how it shows you things about the *Star Trek* universe that you wouldn't expect. Thinking back over the six years of *Deep Space Nine*, it doesn't seem possible that there have been enough Bajorans shown on-screen to make enough cards for them to have their own affiliation. Yet, once the designers started going through the reference works and the episodes,



visible among the other derelicts at Wolf 359, and the people at Paramount provided a photocopy of the design plans used by the artists who created that shot, but basically Decipher computer artist Robert Burns had to create the ship from scratch from the card. How long did that take? "About 20 minutes once I decided how to do it," Robert says. What he did was take a picture of the *Enterprise*, break the ship into its component pieces, and put it back together in the *New Orleans* configuration. The longest part was adding the torpedo launcher to the bottom of the hull.

The Decipher artists work on high-end Macintoshes. They use Photoshop to create the images for the cards, and Quark Express to lay out the cards themselves. Paramount has provided a set of master videotapes of the *DS9* series, and once they have chosen the images, it takes from five minutes to an hour to clean them up. "Television tubes draw all the odd lines in a picture, then all the even ones, but we need both of those together," Robert explains. "The videotapes are digital, but when we don't get the odd and even to match, it's a mess." Even good "pulls," though, can still have color distortion. "And everything is too dark," adds Dan Burns (no relation to Robert), Decipher's creative director.

Watching Robert and Dan work in Photoshop is enough to make you believe in magic. Color distortion shows up as little rainbow hints in otherwise solid-colored backgrounds. Robert will sample the color of the background, then wave the cursor over the little rainbows. Presto; they vanish, and yet the details of line and texture are still there. By the time the artists are done with an image, there is simply no comparison between it and crude, fuzzy video captures that are common on fan Web pages. In fact, seeing a big, bright, smooth 10 x 8 image of Major Kira, it seems a shame that it is going to be compressed down into a 2 x 1.5 image on her card.

"We prefer to work from the series video," Dan says, but some of the cards come from a collection of photos the Paramount props department did. "They took pictures of all their *Star Trek* props and sent them to us." Unfortunately, those pictures don't have backgrounds. "If we can get them from the video, then they're lit up." The displays and lights seen on tricorders and screens in the series are the result of postproduction special effects. The stills just show the physical "boxes" of the props. And yet, when there is no video, Photoshop still has the answer.

"Here I had to put in the background and the table," Robert says, calling up a picture of a science kit. "Then I had to put in the reflection on the table, add the lighting, and make the bottle transparent." The result is that the "dead" prop looks like it has always been on that table. "The designers don't want people in the location cards, so we have to take them out," says Robert, demonstrating how he edited Jake and O'Brien out of a shot of *DS9*'s abandoned ore processor.

The artists appreciated that while Para-

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Continued from page 32

warp drives is way, way overblown. The discussions in *PRL* or elsewhere deal with questions of principle—i.e., are such things ruled out in principle? Here the answer is not clear ... although by no means encouraging.

However, as far as practical warp drives are concerned, the answer is quite clear: They aren't. Even if they could exist, the energy required would exceed the energy available in the entire galaxy! Moreover, as I say in *Beyond Star Trek*, even if they were possible, they wouldn't in the end get you anywhere any faster—the time required to set up the whole experiment would be just as long as it would take you to get from one place to another at the speed of light anyway.

LANDIS: Well, with a wormhole, it may take you a time equal or greater than the light transit time to set up the wormhole in the first place, but once it's in place, you would be able to go back and forth effectively instantly. And, if we happened to be able to find remnant wormholes left over from the big bang, we'd start out with places to go to.

KRAUSS: Yes, but wormholes are even more implausible than warp drives, since they not only depend upon negative energy to exist, but they also depend upon an incredible accident, that the other end of the wormhole can be created wherever you want to go. That is not at all clear, and depends on factors well beyond your control, such as the background geometry of the universe.

LANDIS: But some of the current thinking about the background geometry of the universe predicts that Planck-scale wormholes do exist. I won't say it's yet the consensus among physicists, but nevertheless it's a respectable viewpoint. So it would just be a matter of learning how to take such a sub-microscopic wormhole, "inflate" it to macroscopic size, and stabilize it. That's not something we can do now, or in the foreseeable future, but not beyond the bounds of physics. (A task for a "suitably advanced civilization," as Morris and Thorne put it).

KRAUSS: Well, I disagree, alas. Planck-scale wormholes probably have about as much in common as macroscopic traversable wormholes as virtual particles do to real ones, probably less.

KRIEGER: Fortunately, I think developments in other areas have, ironically, made interstellar travel more practical than ever (though the *Star Trek* mode of "a new star system every week" will never be a reality).

Nanotechnology, being the new drug on the SF market, gets almost as much "rubber science" written about it as traversable wormholes do. However, if you actually look at the literature, nanotech has a much better chance than the "wormhole subway" of delivering on its promises in a practical fashion. (By "nanotechnology" I mean the kind of molecular machines written about by K. Eric Drexler, as opposed to the current fad of applying the

mount has approval on the whole game, the *DS9* actors do not have approval on their images as the *TNG* actors did in that game. "It would take weeks. We'd send the images to Paramount and then they'd send them to the actors, who would be scattered all over the world," Dan says. "We'd always send at least 10 images so there'd be a chance they'd like one."

How many cards will there be in the *DS9* game? "a hundred rare cards, 80 uncommon ones, and 96 common ones," according to Bill. Each pack will have one rare card, three uncommon cards, and five common cards. And yes, the artists and designers have to buy their sets just the way that fans do. "Decipher used to give out full sets to the employees, but we're a much bigger company now. We do get a discount on the price."

"It's actually a good thing," says Tim. "It keeps us chasing cards like the customers. It keeps us from getting jaded. In fact, I was trading cards with Sandy over the Internet before I ever joined the staff."

Bill, Tim, and Sandy all swear that they arrive at their decisions on rules and cards by consensus. "Warren has a philosophy of positive conflict. We'll each go off and do our own projects, and then we'll come together and argue our sides," Bill says. "It is like lawyers in a court room. I'll make the case for the game mechanics and Sandy will make the case for the story needs, and Tim will make the case for the deadline." It is pointed out that in a court, there is a judge who decides. Bill admits that he "sort of" has authority and that Warren has final authority, but it never comes up. "Eventually we reach a consensus."

It is a method that takes many hours. It takes about two months to do a set of cards, and during that time no one goes home at 5:00 PM, but no one seems particularly upset. "It would be great to be god of your own universe and do whatever game you wanted," Bill says, "but *Star Trek* is a universe you love. It is great to work in it and then be able to play in it too."

"*Star Trek* is a strong niche," Tim adds. "This is a place you want to be in. It is a once-in-a-life time chance to work in this universe."

And there are plenty of people who agree. Decipher employs two full-time employees, Marcus Certa and Kyle Heuer, code-named the Emissary and the Traveler, who travel the world, running tournaments at conventions, doing demonstrations in shops and stores, and basically spreading the word about the game. They are aided by 70 "ambassadors," located all over the world, who help with the tournaments and demonstrations on a volunteer basis. The ambassadors help for love of the game and a few free cards every now and then. And it is from these ambassadors and the play-testers that Decipher tries to draw its employees.

"It is one of the best things about the game," says Carol. "It's social. We get to meet all sorts of people we never would without the game." □

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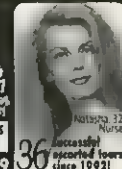
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term to any activity that moves nanometer-sized piles of atoms around.) Today there are laboratories and institutes dedicated to the study of molecular manufacturing at major universities, and the conferences on the topic get bigger and broader with each passing year. No real technical critique of the basic premise has been published in any peer-reviewed journal. So it seems that the ability to manipulate matter at the molecular level, and to build machines that function on that scale, is going to come to pass, whether in 20 years or two-hundred we can't yet know.

The "rubber science" misuse of nanotech in SF has mainly been with regard to playing fast and loose with time scales and energy utilization. Nanotech isn't going to provide anything like real-time shape-shifting, "morphing," or other Hollywood special effects. As a manufacturing technology for incredibly useful tools, though—along with biotechnology, with which nanotech will synergize very well—it will utterly transform not only our entire economy but our concept of what it means to be human.

The application of nanotech and biotech to our material selves opens up multiple pathways to the stars. "Ruggedizing" our bodies to cope with higher accelerations could enable subjective interstellar flight times of months instead of years. Vastly improved recycling and materials technologies, along with increased longevity, could revamp the old "generation ships" concept into a leisurely cruise to the stars, taking only a few decades out of a lifetime of centuries.

LANDIS: Can you think of an good example of science fiction that got the science right?

KRIEGER: Much of Hard science fiction (especially that written by real-life scientists like Gregory Benford and Vernor Vinge) depicts characters who are scientists "doing science"—formulating hypotheses, testing them, and rejecting or revising them.

Similarly, Hard SF authors who aren't themselves scientists frequently do a good job of keeping the events in their fiction consistent with the current state of our scientific understanding. Larry Niven's spaceships aren't going to travel indefinitely on a finite supply of reaction mass without a darned good explanation.

KRAUSS: 2001: A Space Odyssey tried hard to get the science right, but I think that it is very telling that even with that, we now realize that it was a very unrealistic view of the world in 2001. In reality, lots of factors, not usually scientific ones, but monetary and social ones, influence the way we progress.

LANDIS: So, in the absence of warp drives and a Star Trek technology, what do you see in our future?

KRAUSS: I think that one thing is clear: those people that try and guess what the future will be like are usually wrong. They usually have no idea of the big breakthroughs or the big obstacles. As I like to say, if I knew what the next big breakthrough was going to be, I would be doing it right now! □

OUT OF SPACE, OUT OF TIME

Continued from page 71

brass cylinder. What I intended in that mad instant I shall never know: I hesitated, because on the floor between me and that still repulsively churning figure lay the tormented raccoon, which again made some small heart-rending noise. Torn between revulsion and new pity, I was suddenly mastered by the impulse to give it quick surcease. But as I raised the massy telescope to deliver a quick and merciful stroke, the thing that had once been a common sailor blurred and moved... around the 20 or more feet that separated us.

He was before me, and the agony was instant and terrible, for—reaching in and around as I had once reached with a dreamed hand through that accursed angle of stone, he placed his finger on my heart. Pain and death jolted me like lightning; but my mercy-blow was already falling, and by a lucky chance Parker's bestially grinning features now lay in its path. The dreadful intrusion pulled from within me even as my first scream echoed through the bare-walled room. Crazed with fear and panic, I struck again and again until the hateful head was one red pulpy mess. He toppled, and (as once in the past) a merely human body lay before me.

Before falling silent forever, though, he regarded me with those dull eyes that had looked around forbidden corners of space/time, and uttered one last sentence in a thick, gloating voice. Already I had begun to have some inkling of the terrible burning portal and the multiplied hecatomb of lives whose sacrifice, so pleasing to the Old Ones, might give those incomprehensible entities a foothold in this world for their long, slow poisoning of all that is human in humanity, until... but imagination fails.

Of course a handful of the Miskatonic University staff and faculty came seeking the source of my one scream. It was evil luck that they entered the laboratory precisely as I was engaged in putting the wretched raccoon instantaneously out of its misery, by dropping a small leaden isotope-safe at whose impact the creature's skull cracked like a rotted walnut. I did not mind the later attentions of the police one tenth as much as the glare of contempt and revulsion in Dr. Henry Armitage's clear eyes. How could I explain? And whether it is the electric chair or the locked wing of Arkham Sanitarium that lies in wait for me, how now can I persuade my scientist correspondents Szilard, Teller and Wigner not to dispatch that letter of urgent advice on the uses of uranium (which we hoped would also bear the signature of Einstein himself) to President Roosevelt? The dominoes are inexorably falling; the chain reaction has begun; and six years hence...

That clotted, dying, yet triumphant voice had croaked: "The shining portal shall open, and the Masters' required sacrifice shall be offered, at 9:15 in the morning of the sixth of August, 1945." □

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Science Fiction Age

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FIRST FIRE

Continued from page 40

"*Erectus*," corrected Claude.

"Not likely," said Kay. "Fire might have been used by *Homo erectus*. But they can't have been the ones to preserve it ritually."

"Why not?" Emil asked.

"Ritual implies language," said Kay. "Symbolic thinking. Consciousness. Even if *Homo erectus* discovered and used fire, he couldn't have—"

"She," said Claude.

"She then," said Kay, who was unused to being corrected by men in matters of gender. "She wouldn't have constructed a myth. Couldn't have."

"I told you, it's not a myth," said Claude. "It's a simple task. We are the ones who construct the myth. *Sapiens*. *Homo sapiens sapiens*."

"Whatever," Emil pointed the time gun at the tiny flame. He squeezed the trigger until it beeped.

He read the display. Then he looked around the cave at the Children and his two companions.

"Holy fucking shit," he said.

"Huh?" Kay. Claude.

"The flame is almost a million years old."

THAT EVENING THEY SAT around a small campfire outside the cave and shared an impressive brandy from the flask that Claude had brought with him, just in case.

"So it's true," he said, lighting his first Galouise since the Land Rover.

"More than true," said Emil. "It's positive."

"It seems impossible," said Kay. "Impossible and wonderful."

"I wanted to believe," said Claude, shaking his too-large head. "You hope. And you hope not. The real world devours your expectations."

There were big tears in his eyes. He'd had two drinks for every one of Emil's and Kay's. Emil was liking him more.

Kay was on the cell phone, punching in long strings of numbers. "I told him I would call," she explained.

Behind them, in the darkness, the Children went about their business. Nothing in their world had changed. They had known all along.

EMIL SLEPT WITH KAY OUT by the fire. Claude had passed out in the tent, and the Children had slipped off to wherever it was that they stayed, perhaps in the cave with the flame.

Kay was as cool, as studied, as memorable as ever. They made love, then lay side by side in separate bags under the strange equatorial stars, her small hand in his. Not a single con-

stellation was familiar.

It was after midnight when the chopper came in. It would have landed by the cave if the Children hadn't waved it off frantically, the hoods of their robes flattened in the rotor's downdraft. The chopper set down at the base of the scree, a hundred yards away.

That hundred-yard climb was the Tycoon's offering to tradition. Emil, Claude, and Kay were waiting for him at the top of the slope.

"Hey, kid," he said to Kay and gave her a lingering peck on the cheek. Emil was more flattered than jealous. How many men shared a woman with an emperor?

"And it's positive?" he asked Emil, studying the read-out, which had been saved into the time gun's memory.

Emil nodded. "This single flame has burned unbroken for 859,134,347 years." He liked saying it.

"*Erectus*," said the Tycoon.

"*Oui*," said Claude, who was still a little drunk. "Prehuman. Prespeech. This changes everything we have ever imagined about hominid evolution. It means we had, or rather they had, for they were an earlier species, the technology to maintain and control fire long before they had speech or tools."

Last night's campfire was almost out. Claude's empty flask lay beside warm ashes. Fog filled the valleys far below and a million stars blazed overhead.

"It means that there is an unbroken link between ourselves and our earliest ancestors," said Kay. She surprised Emil by taking his hand. Then he saw that she had already taken the Tycoon's. "An unbroken link between you and me and the first human who looked into a campfire."

"And into his own *pensées*," said Claude, taking Emil's other hand.

"Whatever," said the Tycoon, pulling free. "Let's go and have a look."

The Children, who had been waiting silently by the round doorway, led them into the stone cave.

The Tycoon stared into the tiny flame with bright, narrow eyes. "A million years of human culture," he whispered loudly. "And it is but a single page."

Emil was warmed by this reverence, as by a shot of brandy. Kay alone realized what was about to happen. Even the Children were unprepared when the tycoon reached out and, with two fingers, pinched out the flame.

"And now the page is turned."

"*Mon Dieu!*"

"Good God!" said Emil. He lunged, teeth bared, fists clenched, but the Tycoon ran for the doorway, knocking over the oil drums. The Children fell to their knees, wailing. Kay wailed with them.

Outside, Claude and Emil circled the Tycoon, who looked dazed but fierce. Claude picked up a stone.

Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out, one by one.

On the ground, no one noticed. □

BOOKS

Continued from page 19

extrapolates beautifully. It's wonderful, but it's just not enough.

Enough, however, is as good as a feast. When that empathy is there, even in the smallest regard (witness Angel the bioenhanced guard dog of "Dancing on Air"), the difference is striking. "Flowers of Aulit Prison" is another piece where the viewpoint character manages to carry the burden of ideation and polemic, though barely.

Yes, I know. Many readers of science fiction do not consider ideas well-explored or a good dose of didacticism a burden. Fair enough. Yet when those things are allowed to become the sum total of the story, then I submit that what you're reading is no longer a story at all. An essay in disguise, perhaps. Perhaps something else. An SF story needs good ideas, but it also needs people, no matter what planet they're from or however many heads or alternative respiratory appendages they may possess. People are not the sum of their arguments any more than they are Dueling Viewpoints with feet.

Sometimes when Kress succeeds in creating a sympathetic character it almost feels like an accident. It can't be an accident. Otherwise there is no way on Heaven or Earth to explain stories like "Summer Wind" and "Unto the Daughters."

First, "Unto the Daughters," which explores Adam and Eve from the Snake's viewpoint. It's an old notion, but Kress finds another perspective and just enough twist to make it work. More over, there's an emotional depth to the viewpoint character that you just don't see in the more ambitious stories. In her foreword Kress says that she started, not with an idea, but with the snake's voice. That doesn't mean there is not an Idea, as such, but that it arose out of character in the telling. I don't know what conclusions are to be drawn from that, but it does show that Kress is capable of doing very well by her creations.

Witness again, "Summer Wind." This is a deceptively simple retelling of Sleeping Beauty, with one difference: Everyone in the castle is asleep except Briar Rose.

Heroes come to hack at the thorn, heroes fail. It wasn't supposed to happen this way, as the princess tells herself, but there is a plan in back of it all revealed in the fullness of time. Year after year passes until Briar Rose is no longer the nubile young prize the tale normally makes of her. She becomes something else entirely and it has nothing to do with Handsome Princes and rescues.

The story is elegant and affecting and, like "Unto the Daughters," shows what Kress can do when polemic yields place and story comes first. Maybe this isn't what her readership wants and it certainly isn't my place to say. Speaking as one selfish reader, though, I wish she'd do it more often. □

Richard Parks

GALLERY

Continued from page 81

No, all one needs to know about this book is that on page 11 you will see a James Bama painting of Karloff as Frankenstein's creation, a rendering as heartfelt as any of Bama's justly-lauded Western portraits; on page 197 you'll see a contemporary version of an Orientalist panorama, a Winsor McCaylike pastel city with giant dirigibles cruising overhead, the work of the nonpareil Tom Kidd; on page 177 you will see the Frank Kelly Freas image that has become a cultural icon, repeatedly used on rock albums and post-cards: an enormous dull-gray robot with an utterly bewildered expression of loss, holding in his palm a dead human, whose chest the automaton has innocently pierced with a huge finger; on page 141 a Joseph Clement Coll pen and ink illustration from Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, men fighting for their lives against leathery-winged pterosaurs, in a splendidly drafted configuration; on page 167, Virgil Finlay's painting of a blind spaceman begging for coins on a thoroughfare of the future dominated by cyclopean machine beings. And Cartier, and Maitz, and Schomburg, and dear old Frank R. Paul, and more than 130 others—most of whom you've never even heard of—all showcased in alphabetical order, plus an historical overview by the literate and knowledgeable Di Fate that runs over one hundred pages. This is forty-five bucks ever so well spent.

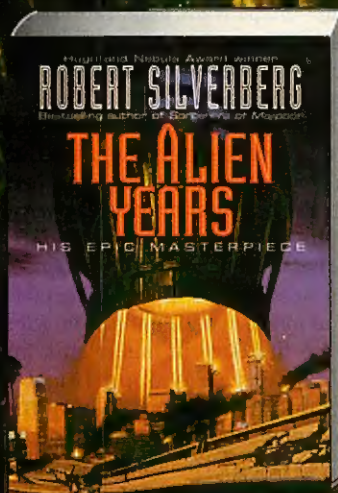
Because this is a world of piquancy and bedazzlement you need to add to the worlds of Monet and Klimt and Vasarely that you already love, that have enriched you so singularly. These were the American artists—as were those who drew comics and ads in *Liberty* magazine and 8-page Tijuana Bibles and Coca-Cola calendars—who most formed our artistic cultural gestalt. These were the people who made it possible for all the Lichtensteins and Warhols and Chuck Closos to draw the attention of Posterity, who hacked out the underbrush so a path was cleared for “serious” (oh, how I love that crappy distinction) artists to hang in serious museums.

Di Fate is Vasco da Gama, the book is Atlantis rediscovered, and you cheat yourself if you don't enjoy its cornucopia of wry delights.

A book for people who want to enjoy the hell out of Art, and not be intimidated into thinking they're philistines because they find nothing of grandeur in a bidet mounted on MOMA's west wall. □

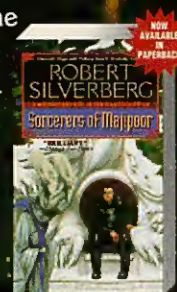
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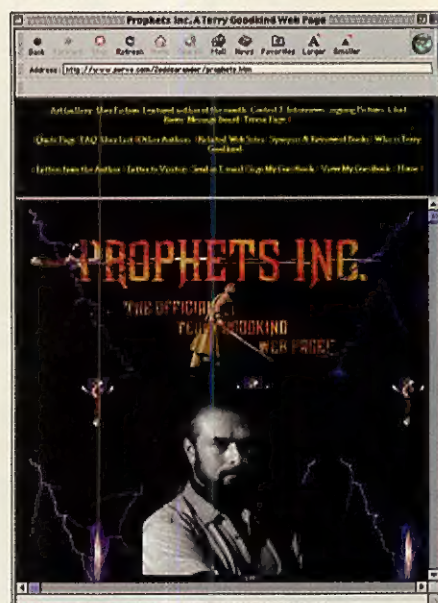
By Cory Doctorow

OMNI WAS THE FIRST SCIENCE FICTION magazine to crack a million circulation, largely due to the editorial acumen of Ellen Datlow. When *Omni* moved to the Web, Ellen continued to preside over it, bringing us some of the best short SF being published online or on trees. That all ended last spring, when *Omni Online* was canceled. That hasn't stopped Ellen! A new Web 'zine, *Event Horizon*, launches this August, with a never-seen-in-the-USA story by Pat Cadigan. Point your browsers at <http://www.e-horizon.com/eventhorizon/>.

Kilgore Trout, Kurt Vonnegut's fictional alter-ego, was the author of many bizarre, hackneyed sci-fi stories. They were invariably published in vile pornographic magazines, hidden among many pink, throbbing photos. Not unlike the Web, really. Trout has spawned—ha, ha—a horde of admirers, who use his work as a standard against which they judge their own efforts. They're pretty funny, actually—<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/4953/trout.html>.

The best all-round guide to things science-fictional remains the *Internet Speculative Fiction Database*, reviewed here earlier, now at <http://www.sfsite.com/isfdb>. But that hasn't stopped others from fielding their own efforts. I've been playing with Magic Dragon's *Ultimate Science Fiction Web Guide*. The *Guide* has several thousand links of note, and makes an attempt at indexing the bibliographies of many, many authors. The *ISFDB* is far more thorough in this regard, but the *Guide* offers many opportunities for serendipitous clicking, at <http://www.maicedragon.com/UltimateSF/>.

Thanks to Cary Thomas, who wrote to tell me about SETI@home (and who, despite reports to the contrary, is a he, not a she). Starting this summer, all you junior spacemen will be able to participate in the search for extraterrestrial life—from home! This isn't a joke; it's a sterling example of the kind

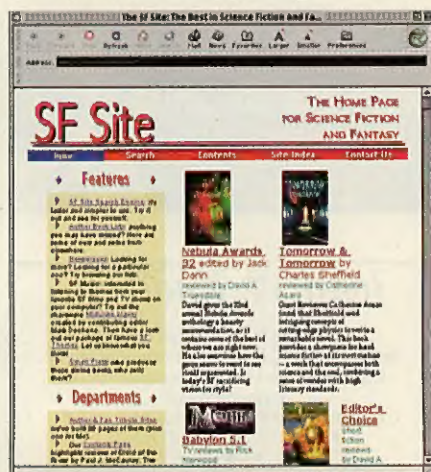


of cool tricks you can do with the Internet. The SETI@home people are developing a "screen saver" that searches data from the Earth's most powerful radio-telescopes for evidence of extraterrestrial communications. Simply install the screen saver, add in some of the radio-telescope data—downloadable from their site at <http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu>, and your computer will join the Great Work, while you go get a coffee. This is beyond cool, folks. It's science.

Internet Auctions are the big thing these days. EBay, the largest and best, lists hundreds of thousands of items at any time, and collects millions of bids per month. Go on, clean out the basement and put your old treasures up for sale—you won't believe what some people will pay for your old *Star Wars* toys (alternately, go on and bid—isn't it about time you got back all those toys your Mom threw away?). SF collectibles are at <http://salamander.ebay.com/aw/listings/list/category152/index.html>, but don't stop there. There's plenty of cool stuff all over the system.

SF Site is a project with serious ambition, a twice-monthly Web 'zine full of quality reviews and news. They also host a number of important resources, including sites for some of this magazine's worthy competitors and the magnificent *ISFDB*. Bookmark <http://www.sfsite.com>.

After years of highly amusing derision, Harlan Ellison has finally joined the WWWorld. His minion, Rick Wyatt, has collaborated with Harlan to produce a humongous site, filled with news, photos, items for sale, items wanted, writing, and, of course, rants. <http://www.menagerie.net/ellison/ellifc.htm>.



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